ADA 38 Force Heretic: Book 2

Thirty-Eight
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In the cockpit of her X-wing Jaina flew alongside two Clawcrafts through hyperspace and into the Unknown Regions. She wasn't going on some romantic daring adventure as her younger brother somehow managed to do—*unless meeting the parents of your boyfriend while checking up on some star charts counted as a daring adventur*e, she mentally amended with a silly grin. She wondered what Jag's family would be like. He rarely mentioned them outside of the rare comments about his younger sister Wynssa, but obviously cared for them.
What little Jaina knew about Jag's parents were mostly from old Holovids made during the war against the Empire. Baron Soontir Fel was legendary, for his skills as a pilot, and also for his ever-shifting allegiances. Jagged's mother, Syal Antilles Fel, was just as renown. Sister to the famed General Wedge Antilles, and successful Holovid actress in her own right, she had caused quite a stir when she emerged married to the 'hero' of the Empire and the rival of her brother. They both sounded like amazing people, and though Jaina was crammed inside her cockpit, she felt more than a little jumpy.
She wasn't the only one traveling to Chiss space with Jagged. Jag's loyal wingman, Shawnkyr Nuruodo had chosen this opportunity to likewise return to her people. Albeit temporarily. Her excuse that she was returning to simply provide a more thorough report to the Ascendancy covered for the fact that she also wanted to redirect some of the attention away from Jagged Fel's very late return. Shawnkyr knew that Jag's prolonged absence was a sore point for some in the Ascendancy and was more than willing to run interference for her wingman. Though Jaina respected Shawnkyr's loyalty to Jag, the two of them always managed to rub each other the wrong way. Maybe it was the fact that Shawnkyr was fully Chiss and believed and lived their doctrines. Or it might have been the spike of jealousy, tinged with a definite sadness, Jaina felt from Shawnkyr anytime the Chiss pilot saw her holding Jag's hand. The only thing that enabled them to get along was the fact that they were both soldiers and they respected each other for their adherence to duty.
Apart from the minor political jostling, and the potential disapproval from Jag's parents, Jaina wasn't expecting all the much in the way of trouble. So it was more than a surprise to her when their hyperspace trip was suddenly cut short. One moment she was in hyperspace

following Jag and Shawnkyr, and the next, the three of them were rudely dragged out back into real space.
An Imperial Star Destroyer unlike any Jaina had seen before floated in front of them; nodules alongside it indicated that it was an interdictor of some kind. But there was no bridge tower that she could see, nor was there any open landing bay. From Jag's startled reaction, this was the first time he was seeing such a ship too.
"This is the Chiss Defense Fleet Star Destroyer Reclaimer to unidentified fighters, transmit code clearance or prepare to be tractored."
"Don't worry, Solo. This is Cormit, one of the few gateways into the Ascendancy. It's a standard checkpoint," Shawnkyr transmitted almost sarcastically, even though there was also some uncertainty in her voice.
"I wasn't worried," Jaina retorted. "But when did the Chiss get Star Destroyers?"
Neither Jag nor Shawnkyr had an answer.
"Captain of the Reclaimer, I am Colonel Jagged Fel, along with my wingman, Major Shawnkyr Nuruodo, and Galactic Alliance representative, Jedi Knight, Colonel Jaina Solo."
No sooner had Jag identified the three of them than the Star Destroyer opened fire with all of its weapons. "Jag! What the kriff?" Jaina yelped, throwing her X-wing into a wild spin behind the two Clawcrafts.
"Captain of the Reclaimer, stand down!"
"That's not working!" Jaina bit out. Her onboard computer flashed a warning that missiles had been fired at her.
Shawnkyr's Clawcraft managed to get an angle on the missiles and her lasers flashed just in time. Jaina's fighter was still pinged with shrapnel, but at least it wasn't destroyed. Seeing two missiles following Shawnkyr, Jaina decided to return the favor. The moment she had slagged those missiles, however, the Star Destroyer fired several more.
"Is this the standard Chiss greeting for returning soldiers?" Jaina said in exasperation.
"Please keep the line clear of all unnecessary chatter, Colonel Solo," Shawnkyr said, the tension in her voice was clear.
Jaina's sensors blared in alarm at the addition to new contacts. "The Star Destroyer is launching fighters."
"I copy, Blue Two, Blue Three, follow me and..." Jag trailed off as two more Star Destroyers jumped in system. These ships, however, began to immediately fire on the *Reclaimer*. The hostile Star Destroyer veered away at high speeds, leaving the few fighters it had launched behind. Once clear, it then jumped to hyperspace. The fighters likewise took an

outbound trajectory, and the other Star Destroyers seemed keen to let them go.
"Colonel Fel, Colonel Solo, Major Nuruodo, this is the High Dynasty, we apologize for the welcome."
"What is going on, father?" Jag said tersely. Jaina could feel his anger and knew that he was thinking about what could have been had his father arrived only a few moments later.
"You've come at a bad time, my son. There has been a disagreement in the Ascendancy. Things are only just beginning to come to a head."
"Disagreement?" Jaina mouthed to herself. She flipped the comm-line open. "Baron Soontir Fel. Thank you for the rescue, but, if you'll excuse me for saying this, Star Destroyers on the same side firing on each other looks a bit more than a disagreement."
"With the Chiss, your bluntness will get you everywhere, Colonel Solo. The Chiss do not have civil wars, if that is your concern. The Ascendancy remains in full control of its territory. Though there may be disagreements within the Ascendancy—such as the one that is currently taking place—for the Chiss, these disagreements are merely temporary states that are easily rectified." There was a hint of amusement in the Baron's voice. *"I must warn you, though, that apart from this disagreement, there are other dangers. Among them is my daughter, who has been very eager to meet you. Despite Jagged not sending any messages to the Ascendancy since his prolonged stay in Galactic Alliance space, Wynssa seems to know all about you."*
"Is that so?" Jaina grinned, feeling Jag wince slightly in his cockpit. "I'll look forward to meeting her as well."
"The three of you are welcome to dock with the High Dynasty. We'll be your escort back to Csilla so that we can avoid any more untoward confrontations. High Dynasty out."
The three fighters lined up together. "So Jag…" Jaina began on a private line.
"I was not aware of any disagreement within the Ascendancy."
"I know," Jaina said reassuringly. "Don't worry about that. I'm fine. Hopefully it's something that will blow over quickly and we can enjoy a nice relaxing day on Csilla."
"If there is one thing I know about Chiss disagreements, is that a relaxing day will be highly unlikely."
"Hey, if anything, I'm probably the first girl ever whose boyfriend takes her to a Chiss civil war for his leave."
"I figured you would be pleased, Goddess," Jag said dryly. *"It took great effort for me to get the Ascendancy to start fighting each other during your visit. I didn't want you to be bored after all."*

"You've definitely inherited that stellar Chiss efficiency," Jaina joked as they took the fighters into the covered landing bay of the *High Dynasty*.
"I live to impress, Goddess."
"Well, I'm definitely impressed."
=}II{= =}II{=
The mission for the 'Save-the-Remnant-From-Becoming-an-Even-Smaller-Re mnant rescue force,' had an inauspicious start. They had only just entered Imperial space when they received an automated message from Ganner telling them to divert course from Bastion to the Rimcee system within the Braxant sector. The fact that the message was automated, and that the rescue force couldn't get in touch with him over the comm-system, was slightly worrying. The Jedi could still feel him in the Force though, so they knew he was alive.
Upon arriving in the five-planet Rimcee system, the rescue force was greeted by a fleet of Star Destroyers and a sundry of support vessels. Behind this small fleet was the Rimcee Station, a medium-sized star base acting as the regional headquarters for the Rimcee sector. An open-channel message from Moff Ephin Sarreti informed them that Ganner was 'indisposed' at the moment, and welcomed the leaders of the rescue force for a personal debriefing aboard the Rimcee Station. Which is how all six members of Twin Suns, Kyp Durron, Face and Kell of Wraith Squadron, the occupants of both the *Raven's Claw* and *Millennium Falcon,* Booster Terrik, and Captain Todra Mayn—of the *Pride of Selonia*—found themselves in the Rimcee Station's secure meeting room.
"Thank you all for coming," Moff Ephin Sarreti began, seated at the head of a rectangular conference table. "Despite the differences of our two governments, your arrival is very welcome."
"Is there a reason we are not meeting at Bastion?" Han said very un-diplomatically.
Moff Sarreti nodded. "Indeed. At the moment, both myself and Grand Admiral Pellaeon are on 'official' tours of the Empire. We wanted to see what transpired while we were away."
"And you've left Ganner and several individuals behind to monitor what happens," Anakin said shrewdly.
"We have. The *Widowmaker* is still in orbit around Bastion keeping an eye on things. As welcome as your arrival is, had your ships arrived over Bastion, several long term plans would have been ruined." Moff Sarreti activated a flat-screen monitor, and the lights in the room dimmed as a series of images showed. "Behind me is an image of every Yuuzhan Vong operative within the Empire that we have thus far

managed to uncover. We are fairly certain that we have ninety percent of their operatives identified."
The image changed to show several times that many pictures.
"These are the known Yuuzhan Vong sympathizers and agents working in concert with their operatives. For these sympathizers, because they do not stand out in the Force, we are less certain as to the percentage we have identified. Intelligence analysts say that we have closer to sixty percent tagged, though they will not stake their life on that number."
"The Yuuzhan Vong have infiltrated the Empire much the same way they infiltrated the New Republic," Leia commented evenly, after studying the images.
"Jedi Rhysode likewise noted the similarity. It was how we managed to deduce the location of many of the infiltrators. By studying the compromised areas of your government, we were able to draw analytical comparisons to our own." Moff Sarreti pressed a button on his control, and this time a singular picture appeared behind him. "This is the Yuuzhan Vong in charge of their affairs in this region, B'shith Vorrik."
"Vorrik?" Shaeri, who had come with the group aboard the *Falcon*, said in surprise. All eyes turned to her and she shrank back in her chair slightly.
"Do you know something about him?" Sarreti asked patiently.
Shaeri nodded slowly. "Not him specifically, but Domain Vorrik is one of the rare Domains that exist in two castes. They are both warriors and priests."
"Which deity do their priests worship?" Tahiri said gently, trying to ease Shaeri's nervousness.
Shaeri swallowed. "Though a majority of their Domain is made up of warriors who worship Yun-Yammka, their priests specialize in worship of Yun-Lingni."
"Yun-Lingni?" Several people questioned at once.
Shaeri's good eye bulged in fear, as if the name would invoke the god in question. "Please, do not say his name so loud."
"Tahiri, Jacen, do either of you know about this deity?" Mara said, looking to the two.
Both shook their heads.
Shaeri wrung her hands as she spoke up again. "Yun-Lingni is the Yuuzhan Vong god of shadows and death. He is the lowest deity in the Yun'o, a servant of Yun-Yammka, and those who worship him are often ridiculed. But the Dark God is the most feared, and the most terrible. It is believed that simply saying his name will invoke the death of

someone in your presence. If you say his name and you are alone, he will come for you." She looked to the Wraiths. "If the Wraiths were Yuuzhan Vong, they would worship not Yun-Yammka, but Yun-Lingni."
"So basically, Domain Vorrik is the Yuuzhan Vong equivalent of Special Forces?" Kell said.
"They are sometimes known as the…well, your language would call them the 'Hidden Hand of the Supreme One.'" Shaeri answered a bit more confidently, slowly relaxing as the inquisitive gaze softened when they realized how frightened she was. "Their agents are often mistaken as worshippers of Yun-Harla, and they even go so far as to dress in the guise of a priest from Yun-Harla; or an agent of the Intendant caste. Often, they will work alongside these other agents without anyone even knowing. They are a secretive group, and though they are only one of two Domains who openly worship the Dark God, Domain Vorrik is the only Domain that arms their Shamed Ones and uses them in their missions."
More eyebrows were raised, even Jacen and Tahiri's. "They arm their Shamed Ones?"
Shaeri nodded. "Do not expect any of Domain Vorrik to be Freed Ones in disguise. All their Shamed Ones enjoy much more freedom than the rest of the Yuuzhan Vong Domains. It is why I know so much about them in the first place. All Shamed Ones have heard, and at one point, yearned to be Shamed within Domain Vorrik."
Silence followed. Moff Sarreti and everyone else in the room slightly stunned at the information.
"Now we know, thank you…"
"Shaeri," the former Shamed One answered Moff Sarreti.
"Shaeri," the Moff said graciously. "This only makes the situation all the more dire when added with what else I have to tell you. Through investigating all of the sympathizers and Yuuzhan Vong operatives, we have learned that two Moffs on the Council of Moffs, as well as several minor governors, are backing a treaty with the Yuuzhan Vong. Additionally, we have identified a leak within the Imperial Intelligence division, though that discovery came at the cost of several lives."
He flipped a switch and three faces appeared on the screen behind him. "Moff Kurlen Flennic, Moff of the Prefsbelt sector, and one of the older Moffs. He is the most dangerous. Since his sector borders Wild Space and has a major hyperspace route that runs through it, his sector fleet is the second largest in the Empire. We know that he stands against Grand Admiral Pellaeon and favors a non-aggression pact with the YuuzhanVong."

"I would imagine someone of his experience would want to preserve the Empire as it is," Leia said with a frown. "He has to know that any agreement with the Yuuzhan Vong would jeopardize that."
"The only problem is that he sees Grand Admiral Pellaeon as a threat to those old values," Sarreti replied. "As long as Pellaeon remains in power, Flennic will do whatever he can to oppose what Pellaeon wants. If he has to, he will no doubt raise arms against Pellaeon."
"That's treason." Booster Terrik harrumphed. "Can't you Imperials do what you usually do and haul him into a mock-trial and execute him?"
"Unfortunately, he has a very strong support base, and he is not the only Moff who feels as he does," Sarreti said glibly.
"But he is the only Moff whom you believe will act violently for his beliefs," Luke said.
Sarreti shook his head. "Not the only one. The second Moff we have under observation is actually one of our newest Moffs, Moff Deran Rosset. He became a Moff shortly after the start of your war with the Yuuzhan Vong and controls the Velcar sector, a sector that neighbors Moff Flennic's. Like Moff Flennic, he opposes Grand Admiral Pellaeon's policies. Unlike Moff Flennic, we are certain that he, or someone high up in his office, favors a full alliance with the Yuuzhan Vong. Where Flennic is content with his sector, we believe that the Yuuzhan Vong have promised Moff Rosset the leadership of the new Empire should an alliance take place."
"Ah, good ol' greed," Han sighed. "I'll never get tired of the many people who sell out for power or credits."
Sarreti tilted his head in acknowledgement. "The last of the three individuals is the Deputy Director of Imperial Intelligence, Torvin Xyn. He has been using our own intelligence network against us and is slanting information to favor a treaty with the Yuuzhan Vong. Torvin Xyn, however, is in fact a Yuuzhan Vong himself. We left him in place to see just how far his reach extends. What we found was disturbing. In coordination with all the operatives and sympathizers, at a single command, the Yuuzhan Vong have the ability to bring down the government in a matter of minutes."
"Which is the reason why you and Grand Admiral Pellaeon have been moving so carefully," Leia surmised. "I would assume you have people in place to counter the agents you've uncovered?"
"Yes," Sarreti acknowledged. "Unfortunately, without the consent of the other Moffs, any action on our part will make it seem as if the Grand Admiral and myself are trying to bias the negotiations in favor of a treaty with the Galactic Alliance."
"Where *do* the other Moffs stand?" Luke asked.

"Not in favor of a treaty with the Galactic Alliance," Sarreti said dryly. "Since your government has begun to turn the tide in the war, the Moffs don't see any point in upsetting the status quo. At best, the majority of them wish the Empire to remain a separate entity that wants nothing to do with the events occurring in the rest of the galaxy. Moffs Flennic and Rosset represent the extreme end of that view."
"They do realize that isolating the Empire will only make it more vulnerable and that the war *will* come whether they want it to or not," Mara pointed out with a frown.
"I am afraid that I am the outlier among the Moffs," Sarreti shook his head. "Where I see the many benefits a treaty with the Galactic Alliance can provide, my colleagues fear a dilution of the High Imperial culture. I am afraid they would rather die, and take the Empire down with them, than allow themselves to admit that we need your government's help."
"What would the reaction of the Council of Moffs be if they discovered the extent of the Yuuzhan Vong infiltration of this government?" Luke asked. "If the other Moffs embrace the old practices, then would they not object to having Yuuzhan Vong within their ranks?"
"They would," Sarreti said. "But the problem still lies with Flennic, Rosset, and the Vong commander. Any attempt to dislodge the Vong network will undoubtedly trigger a chain-reaction resulting in the activation of the various operatives and sympathizers throughout the Empire. We haven't yet identified all of them, and some of the ones we haven't identified are in key departments and positions. To miss even one operative would mean the deaths of many. And yet, we no longer have the time to identify the rest."
"Then we buy more time," Anakin spoke up. "Or we reduce the number of threats without triggering this chain-reaction."
"The Grand Admiral has brought all the time he could," Sarreti remarked with a raised eyebrow. "The Council of Moffs vote on a possible treaty next month. And I highly doubt that we can do the second alternative. As I told you, the sympathizers are highly connected."
"No, he's right," Mara said sharply, picking up on her nephew's thoughts. "You said Moff Flennic was one of the old guard and that Moff Rosset was the newest Moff on the council. We can use that against them."
"From what you've told us, it sounds as if they both made separate deals with B'shith. Flennic just wants to remove Grand Admiral Pellaeon from power, preserving the nature of the Empire. But Rosset wants to be appointed the leader of the Empire once a full alliance with

the Yuuzhan Vong is complete," Anakin nodded. "It doesn't sound like an arrangement Flennic would endorse or accept. Not only is Rosset half the man's age, but he is even more extreme than Flennic."
"You want to play the two Moff against each other?" Sarreti said.
Anakin shook his head. "No. We need to keep the Empire as united as possible. We simply let the both of them know of the deal B'shith made with the other. We can approach Flennic first, since he truly seems to have the good of the Empire in mind. After telling him of the deal B'shith made with Rosset, we can also reveal the extent to which the Yuuzhan Vong have infiltrated the Empire. Hopefully this will be enough to secure his help for the time being."
"And Rosset?"
"We arrive in his sector with the full force of the Empire. We point out what happened to Viqi Shesh and the many others who betrayed the New Republic," Mara remarked. "And we show him that the Yuuzhan Vong don't want partners. That, as useful as they find traitors, they don't trust them either. Rosset has to have at least some brains to have become a Moff at such a young age. If all else fails, we can confront him with the knowledge that he intends to launch a coup, then have Grand Admiral Pellaeon bring him back in line, forcefully if necessary."
Sarreti blinked at Mara and Anakin for a moment, then cracked a wry smile and shook his head. "Remind me to add some Jedi to my team of analysts and strategists next time."
"You'll also need to get the permission of the other Moffs to act on the Yuuzhan Vong infiltrators in the process of talking to Flennic and Rosset," Anakin said. "Once B'shith learns about their change of heart, he'll most likely launch a full-scale attack."
"Yuuzhan Vong are very bad losers," Kell said sagely.
"Not as bad as Wedge though," Face pointed out.
"They're still pretty bad," Kell agreed. "You'll know when you have them on the ropes if their commander contacts you and start yelling about how doomed you are and how much they'll delight in killing you in some inventive way."
"They'll promise to sacrifice you to their gods," Tahiri added.
"And brag about how great their strength is," Shaeri chimed in.
"And then they'll repeat that with smaller words if you don't cower in fear," Alema finished.
"I'll be sure to add that to our intelligence reports about the Yuuzhan Vong," Moff Sarreti said with some mirth. "In the meantime, I do have a task for you Jedi. B'shith's fleet is hiding somewhere in the Empire. Probably very close to Flennic's and Rosset's sectors. I can't move my

fleet without alarming any of the other Moffs. I need all of it here anyways to protect Bastion. As the Council of Moffs have given B'shith temporary diplomatic immunity, the other Moffs won't be inclined to seek out the Yuuzhan Vong fleet either."
"You want us to find it for you?" Luke asked.
"And relay its compliment of vessels back to me if you would," Sarreti said. "If things go as we hoped, then the Empire should be ready for a Yuuzhan Vong attack when we reject the treaty with them."
=}III{= =}III{=
Despite Baron Soontir Fel's relatively lighthearted, but dire warning about the state of the Chiss Ascendancy, Jaina quickly learned that the situation was far more serious than the Chiss wanted to admit. Seated with Jag inside Baron Fel's personal office in the Star Destroyer, Jaina grimly listened to the debriefing.
Behind a simply metal desk, Baron Fel gestured with his hands. "Some time ago, shortly before the Yuuzhan Vong arrived, several ruling families fell under the sway of an insectoid race called the Killiks. They began to care more for the Killik hives than the Ascendancy, and naturally, this posed many problems. Several other houses, heavily dependent on the Killiks for labor, likewise began to suffer the same ailments, trying to manipulate Chiss policy to better help these hives. A decision was made to remove the affected houses from power."
"That is partly how our family ascended through the ranks of Chiss society," Jag said to Jaina, briefly glancing back at his father for approval. "My father, assisted the Ascendancy in reducing the number of ruling families controlling the Ascendancy from nine to four. Our own family was rewarded for our efforts, and became strongly tied to the Nuruodo Ruling Family."
"Nuruodo," Jaina mused. "Is that why you have Shawnkyr as your wingmate?"
"In part," Jag confirmed.
Soontir continued the briefing. "The actual process was rather bloodless and few shots were fired. The affected families were simply stripped of their possessions and exiled. All was quiet for about two, maybe three years. But then, when the Yuuzhan Vong invaded, problems began to arise again. Sympathizers and survivors of the exiled families have suddenly reappeared. Several of the surviving family members have made declarations that they are the legitimate rulers of the Ascendancy, or that we should at least acknowledge their families once again. The Ascendancy likes to say that they have things under control, but in actuality, the internal schism this disagreement has caused has severely weakened them."

"Is that why the Chiss have been relatively quiet throughout this war?" Jaina asked
"In part," Soontir mimicked his son. "We have been silent in the war against the Yuuzhan Vong for both internal and external reasons."
"External?"
"Colonel Solo, how much do you know about the Vagaari?"
"Vagaari?" Jaina frowned. "I don't think I've heard of them. No, wait, I think Uncle Luke mentioned them during his investigation of the *Outbound Flight*. They're an alien race that lives in the Unknown Regions."
"And one of the many threats the Ascendancy keeps at bay," Soontir added. "After the investigation of the *Outbound Flight* six years ago, the Vagaari attempted to launch an attack on Chiss held frontier worlds. They were repulsed, hunted down, and had their military capability destroyed. But since then, because the Vagaari use their own version of bio-tech, they became natural allies in the eyes of the Yuuzhan Vong. This relationship has been clear from recent encounters the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force has had with the Vagaari. Vagaari marauders utilizing Yuuzhan Vong void technology have been seen on the fringes of Chiss-held space. One of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force's cruisers was ambushed after it was dragged out of space by a mine very similar to that of a Yuuzhan Vong dovin basal. And, most recently, Vagaari fighters were seen operating in concert with Yuuzhan Vong coralskippers that had the bodies of Vagaari prisoners strapped down to the exteriors. The Ascendancy fears that it is only a matter of time before the Vagaari launch a full-scale attack in concert with the exiles."
"The Yuuzhan Vong are doing everything to keep the Chiss out of the war with the Galactic Alliance," Jaina observed.
"That was my conclusion as well," Soontir agreed. "Unfortunately, the Yuuzhan Vong are succeeding in that regard. Between the disagreements within the Ascendancy and the possibility of a proxy-war looming in the near future, the Ascendancy can do little more than shore up its own borders. You could not have come at a worse time. It is very likely that the Ascendancy will either collapse or come very close to doing so while you stay on Csilla. No, to be more precise, it is more likely that your arrival will be the spark needed to ignite the simmering conflict."
"What has the Ascendancy done to prepare for the Vagaari?" Jag asked, frowning.
"They have recalled all ships and have decided to cede all but the core worlds of the Ascendancy," Soontir said grimly. "The internal schism

makes it impossible for them to hold onto any of the border systems with any confidence. Rather than sacrifice ships to treachery, the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force has invested heavily on protecting Csilla and linchpin systems."
"Things have degraded to such a point already?" Jag said in shock.
"Much has changed in the three years since you have been gone," Soontir replied. "The Ascendancy had begun constructing their own version of the Imperial Star Destroyers two years ago, in preparation to counter these threats. But elements of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force have gone missing. The *Reclaimer* was among them. As were several other newly constructed Star Destroyers. This vessel, and eight others, are the only Chiss Star Destroyers currently in Ascendancy hands. This is out of the fifteen constructed."
"Is there anything we can do to help?" Jaina immediately asked.
Soontir smiled. "I am sure that there will be a situation where your skills and experience will be required. In the meantime, get some rest. I have already had your belongings moved to temporary quarters aboard this vessel. We will arrive at Csilla in approximately five standard hours."
=}IV{= =}IV{=
"*Kell Dragon bah Mando'adla alor'ad, ke'gyce nu'gar jurkadi,"* Tyria Sarkin Tainer said firmly as several Mandalorian fighters formed up in preparation for attack. "*Ke'gyce nu'gar jurkadi!"*
"She's basically telling them not to attack," Doran translated for Sannah.
"I got some of it," Sannah protested, having learned about some of the language on their trip over. Having a directly link to someone who already knew the language was kind of helpful in that regard. Well, that and coupled with the motivation of wanting to at least have some skill to impress Dinua, Doran's Mandalorian 'more-than-best-friend-less-than-girlfriend,' ensured that she already had the basic grammar down.
"Kell Dragon, stick to Basic, your Mando'a is atrocious," remarked the Mandalorian in charge of the challenging fighter squadron.
"Hello to you too, Dinua," Tyria said with a laugh.
"Follow us down to the planet. Mand'alor was informed of your return and wishes to speak with you."
"Will do, slaving my nav-computer to your Pursuer." Tyria turned off the comm and glanced at her son with a raised eyebrow. "She definitely hasn't changed."
"She has her own fighter squadron, that's something," Doran said, as the knife-like fighters settled into a diamond formation around their

ship and the group began to descend not to the Mandalorian homeworld, but to the junkworld of Raxis Prime. They had sent a long-range transmission to Mandalore, and found out that the leader of its armed forces was on this junkworld secretly training anti-Yuuzhan Vong militia as well as his own elite corps of Supercommandos.
"Uh huh," Sannah said, as nerves once again began to get the better of her. She didn't know why she wanted approval from this Mandalorian who was a year old than Doran, but she found herself wanting it all the same.
Doran's previous Mandalorian adventure had been an interesting one to say the least. Shortly after the war had broken out, the current leader of the Mandalorian armed forces had set up a training camp for all Mandalorian Protectors to make sure they were ready for the conflict that was soon to engulf the entire galaxy. Tyria, using her own Mandalorian contacts, had managed to get Doran into said training camp where he spent a full year learning just how to survive. The best of prospects among the Protectors were then chosen by the Mandalorian leader to be *Ori'ramikade*, or Supercommandos. Naturally, being in the top of her class, Dinua would have been among those elite Mandalorian soldiers.
"Raxis Prime," Tyria said as the burn of re-entry subsided. "What better way to make sure that the weak are killed than by training here."
"Killed?" Sannah's head snapped up in alarm.
"It's a Supercommando training camp," Doran reassured her. "The regular recruits go through basic training on planets like Gargon, like Dinua and I did. She probably finished her training here though. Her dream was to become one of the elite *Mando'ade*, a Protector Supercommando, just like her mother."
Sannah detected a note of sadness in his voice. "Her mother died?"
"During the Vong invasion," Doran nodded. "She was killed trying to covertly stop a Vong plot. Dinua didn't like to talk about it much. Because her mother was so skilled and renowned among the Supercommandos though, Dinua tended to push herself as much as she could; sometimes to the point of exhaustion."
"Oh," Sannah said, unsure of what to say.
"Looks like they're guiding us towards that clearing," Tyria commented, as their ship was steered around columns upon columns of towering debris.
"Is that a Star Destroyer embedded in the rubble?" Sannah gaped, pointing out the broken remains of the massive triangle cruiser. It formed the base of an even taller pile of rusted metal and scrap.
"Looks like it," Doran confirmed. "TIE parts all over too."

"Wonder how they got the ship there," Sannah muttered. "Think they just crashed it into the planet?"
"They'd have to," Doran scratched his head. "Unless they hired some super-Jedi to pull the ship from orbit."
"Right," Sannah rolled her eyes. "Like that's even possible."
The *Kell Dragon* set down on a landing platform, along with two of the Mandalorian fighters. The rest took off to resume their patrol. As the occupants of the gunboat unbuckled their safety harnesses, Sannah let out a gasp of surprise.
"Oh Force, is that…that…" Sannah's mouth opened and close like a fish out of water as she saw who was waiting for them.
"Boba Fett?" Tyria said, as if meeting the most infamous bounty hunter alive was an every-day occurrence. "Yes. He's the current *Mand'alor*. If you want an autograph, Doran can get you one. He had the same reaction you did when we first saw him."
"I had to outshoot, out spar, and outfly Dinua in a competition for that autograph!" Doran protested.
"But Sannah's your girlfriend, you should do anything to keep her happy," Tyria said playfully.
Doran glanced back at Sannah who was still staring at the Mandalorian worshipfully. No Jedi child alive hadn't heard of Boba Fett and his deeds. He was that 'bad boy' anti-hero all the 'cool' kids wanted to be.
Sannah seemed to snap herself out of her trance and shook her head with a grin. "No way, if I'm getting an autograph, I want to earn one too."
"You most likely won't be facing Dinua," Doran supplied, guessing her real motive.
"Spoilsport," Sannah stuck her tongue at him.
"She'd probably beat you anyways," Doran added most unwisely as an afterthought; to which Tyria hung her head and groaned while Sannah's eyes flashed at the challenge.
"Is that so?"
Doran swallowed, realizing his mistake. "Errr…she might? I barely beat her and that was three years ago. She's a Supercommando now, remember."
"Let's not keep *Mand'alor*waiting, kids," Tyria said with forced cheer.
"I'm going to make you eat those words, Adventure Boy," Sannah growled as they rose from their chairs.
Doran could only mentally bang his head against the wall as Sannah began to cycle the airlock. Why did girls have to be so complicated?
"Come on," Tyria said in amusement, placing a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure Dinua's eager to see you."

"I'm sure Sannah's eager to see her too," Doran moaned.
"Where's that Mandalorian spirit that Dinua admired so much?" Tyria cajoled.
"Sannah has it, she won't give it back." Doran said as he walked to the hatch.
Tyria smiled and was glad that her son was having normal teenage problems. Though she was sure he probably preferred his problems to be more galaxy-threatening, some bit of normalcy in their hectic life was definitely welcome.
The hatch opened and the noxious fumes of Raxis Prime's very unhealthy atmosphere washed over them.
"Both of you created that purifying Force bubble around you, the one that I taught you, right?" Tyria checked.
"Yeah," the teens nodded.
The pilots of the two Mandalorian fighters were waiting for them, while Boba Fett stood a little ways away, across a narrow walkway. One of the pilots immediately moved up to Doran, her green Mandalorian armor a striking contrast to the oranges and browns of Raxis Prime.
"*Su'cuy gar, di'kut." So you're alive, idiot.*
Doran smirked, clasped her outstretched forearm in greeting, and was pulled into a firm embrace. "*Gar balyc. Tion'gar cuyi Ori'ramikad?" You too. You're a Supercommando now?*
"*Lek."* The Mandalorian motioned to Sannah, who had stepped closer to Doran by reflex. *"Bal tion'ad ibic ad hukaat'kama?" Yes. And who is this child, watching your back?*
"*Kaysh cuyi ner jatne vod, Sannah. Kaysh cuyi balyc Jetii." She's my best friend, Sannah. She's also a Jedi.*
"*Gar cuyi Jetii?"* The Mandalorian seemed to look at Sannah in what could only be translated as distain. It was hard to tell because of her helmet, but the Mandalorian's tone said it all.
"That's right," Sannah said. She held out her own hand. "I'm Sannah. His girlfriend."
At that, the Mandalorian appeared to glance sidelong at Doran, as if she couldn't believe him. Shaking her head, she stepped around Sannah and nodded to Tyria.
"It is good to see you, Jedi Sarkin Tainer." Dinua said in Basic, completely ignoring Sannah's hand.
Tyria's lips twitched as the older Jedi fought back a smile. She could literally see Sannah bristle at the obvious snub, and for a moment, pitied her son. "You as well. I'm glad you're still among the living."
"As am I." Dinua began walking. "Come, we shouldn't keep *Mand'alor* waiting."

The group crossed the small walkway in an uncomfortable silence. Between Doran's nervous shifting, and the death glares Sannah was drilling into the back of the Mandalorian woman's helmet, it was as if a bomb was waiting to go off.
"So…" Doran said haltingly. "She's Dinua. The other pilot is Jintar. They were the two I trained with at Gargon."
"Uh huh," Sannah said, not ceasing her attempts to fry Dinua's brain. "What's her problem anyways?"
"She takes some getting use to," Doran said faintly. "You'll warm up to her. Promise."
"*Copaani mirshmure'cye, Doran?*" Jintar, who was wearing black Mandalorian armor and walking alongside them, chuckled.
"It can hurt to hope, can it?" Doran deadpanned.
"Your funeral, mate," Jintar shook his helmeted head.
Sannah made a mental note to learn Mandalorian as fast as she could. Any further conversation had to wait for later, however, as they arrived at the end of the walkway.
"Welcome to Raxis Prime, Jedi," Boba Fett announced dryly.
Tyria bowed her head politely. "Thank you for taking the time to see us."
"I trust you won't waste it," Boba Fett said.
"We've reason to believe that the Yuuzhan Vong are amassing a fleet to attack Mandalore," Tyria said promptly.
"Is that so?"
"The Ryn contacted us and gave me this datapad," Tyria handed it to Boba Fett, who handed it to Dinua without looking at it. "Since you went through so much effort to warn the New Republic about the Vong, I thought I'd return the favor."
"What do you think, Jeban?" Boba commanded tonelessly.
"It is a sizable fleet if these numbers are right," Dinua acknowledged. "It doesn't look like they'll be ready to attack for another year though. The number of supply and troops ships the Ryn have tracked to Bandomeer isn't enough to support a fleet of that size for any prolonged engagement. If they *are* coming anytime soon, they mean to annihilate and not conquer."
"And your recommended course of action?" Boba said as they entered what used to be the bridge of the downed Star Destroyer the Jedi had seen on their approach to the planet. The Mandalorians had restored several systems and had a functional holoprojector in the center of the room. Dinua inserted the datapad into the projector, and several other armored Mandalorians in the room stepped forward to review the information.

"A pre-emptive strike. If these Yuuzhan Vong are going to target us, we should hit them first, reduce the number of ships and people they can throw at us."
"And if those ships were going to attack elsewhere, any pre-emptive strike could jeopardize the treaty we have with them," Boba said, covering all his bases.
"A small team of commandoes acting like Galactic Alliance soldiers then," Sannah spoke up, instantly attracting the attention of every Mandalorian in the room. All she needed to do was glance at Dinua to find the strength to continue. "If this team goes in to sabotage the fleet, they can both limit any danger to Mandalore and place the blame of the attack on the Galactic Alliance. If the Yuuzhan Vong really are going to attack you, you'll be able to tell by their reactions. If they were going to attack elsewhere, you will have helped to reduce the threat at no risk to yourselves."
Boba emitted a hoarse laugh. "And what is your name, Jedi?"
"Sannah, Jedi Apprentice from Yavin Eight," Sannah said, holding her head high.
"A Melodie then," Boba nodded. "Good people. Helped me catch an aquatic bounty once. Anyway, Dinua, what do you say to Jedi Sannah's plan?"
"Anyone who goes will obviously be under the Jedi's authority," Dinua said after some hesitation. "If one of us is leading the attack, we'll end up thinking and acting like Mandalorians and not Galactic Alliance soldiers."
"So you approve of her plan?"
Dinua's expression was hidden by her helmet, but it was clear she was focused on the closeness to which Sannah was standing near Doran. The body-language of the young Melodie was clear enough that the other Mandalorians in the room had picked up on it instantly; there was no mistaking Sannah's posture for anything other than a warning of, 'he's mine'.
"*Mando'ad*Jeban, *Mand'alor* asked you a question," one of the other Mandalorians barked.
"I approve, sir," Dinua said quickly.
"Good, then you're leading the Mandalorians on the mission. Your past history with the Jedi Sarkin-Tainers should enable all of you to work together."
"Understood *Mand'alor*," Dinua acknowledged.
Boba Fett took another datapad from one of the other Mandalorians in the room and held it out for her. "Pick your team out of these men and women. All, some, or none. Whichever you feel will contribute to the

success of the mission. We're training Protectors, might as well get some use out of them. See if they can actually do more than shoot droids and Jawas. Have the Jedi help you out if you need advice."
"That will not be necessary, *Mand'alor*," Dinua said sliding the datapad into her utility belt. "I will not let you down."
"See that you don't." Boba Fett said. "In the meantime, Melodie. I expect you to be able to perform to our standards. I don't want any of my men dying because you weren't up to it. The Jedi Sarkin-Tainers have already proven themselves. Dinua will run you through some basic training.
"*Mand'alor*?" Dinua said in surprise.
"You have a month to pick your team and get this Jedi up to par, Dinua," Boba said calmly, motioning to Sannah. "Provided her master allows it?"
Tyria inclined her head. "I do."
"Good luck," Doran whispered to Sannah.
"What have you gotten me into this time, Adventure Boy?" Sannah muttered, giving him a brief kiss in full view of everyone else.
"Hey, you wanted some experience before you went became a fish," Doran said when they parted. "Think about it, you get to be the first Melodie with Mandalorian training from a Supercommando."
"You have a very odd way of looking at things, Adventure Boy," Sannah said fondly, pulling away and looking towards Dinua. "I'm ready. When do we start?"
"This way," Dinua motioned back outside. "Let's see what you can do."
"In the meantime, Jedi Doran," Boba said, directing his attention to the other young Jedi. Doran, who had watched his two friends leave the tent while holding his breath and crossing his fingers, looked back to Boba Fett. "It appears that the new Supercommandos will be seeing some real action soon. Why don't you go with Jintar here," The Mandalorian leader motioned to the second pilot. "And see if you can't give them some challenge. Shake off some of that rust while you're at it."
"I obey, *Mand'alor*," Doran bowed. He straightened and nodded towards Jintar. They both clasped their hands to their chests in salute to Boba Fett one last time before they left the room.
"*Ade*," one of the Mandalorians chuckled once the teens were gone. "You can put them in armor and give them fancy weapons, but they'll still be kids at heart."
"Jedi *and* Mandalorian," Tyria agreed, shaking her head and sitting down on a cargo crate.

"Jedi and Mandalorians working together," Boba Fett said, sounding slightly bemused. "Something must really be going wrong with the galaxy if it's coming to this."

=}V{= =}V{=

With Wraith Squadron, the *Errant Venture*, *Pride of Selonia,*the *Pulsar Skate,*and Luke Skywalker mingling with the criminal elements to get information about the state of the Remnant, before going on to meet up with Moff Rosset; Kyp's Dozen, the *Millennium Falcon, Raven's Claw*, Shaeri, and Danni Quee were going about a more legitimate, diplomatic way. The rest of the 'Save-the-Remnant' force was out searching for a missing Imperial ship in a different part of Remnant space, with the hope that they would find a Yuuzhan Vong fleet lying in wait.

With an exception for the latter group, the other two had their own Imperial advisors to help ease diplomatic tension.

To Booster's great amusement, his group had been assigned one Commander Lakwii Varrscha; former captain of the *Virulence*—the very ship Booster had bluffed right out from under her. After being demoted to lieutenant for a couple of years, Lakwii had only recently regained her previous rank. She bore no ill-will towards Booster, though she did wince at the various 'improvements' her previous command had gone through since she had last seen it.

The *Raven's Claw*had received one Lieutenant Pallin, and had split away from the *Falcon* to investigate possible Peace Brigade activity on Ord Serda. The Empire had classified the Peace Brigade as a political terrorist organization, and while the Yuuzhan Vong were currently off limits, their mercenary allies were not.

Lastly, a Commander Garith Green was the liaison for both the *Falcon* and the accompanying Kyp's Dozen. An older, competent enough officer, he enjoyed regaling the younger Jedi about his time serving aboard the first Death Star. Despite his easy going, almost foolish nature, his smile never did reach his eyes. He was a natural choice, according to Moff Sarreti, because Commander Green was from Yaga Minor, the *Falcon* and Dozen's current destination.

Officially, both Booster's group and the *Falcon* were going to their locations to un-work any alliances the Yuuzhan Vong might have made with the Moffs. Unofficially, the two groups were separating to see if those said Moffs were hiding Yuuzhan Vong fleets within their territory.

"*I was told to expect you,"* Moff Kurlen Flennic said with a thin layer of contempt lining his voice. From the view of the cockpit, the occupants of the *Falcon* could see the pride and joy of the Presfbelt sector fleet spread out among the web-work of orbital shipyards. It was as if Moff

Flennic had called all his biggest and meanest looking ships in for a very obvious display of power and wealth. Even without the added ships, Yaga Minor had a stunning array of defenses due to its status as the Imperial Remnant's primary shipyards.
"Thank you for taking the time to meet with us, Moff Flennic," Leia said patiently into the headset. "I assure you that we will take as little of it as possible."
"*See that you do. I do not have as much time to pander to your needs as you might think. Unlike yourself, I have a sector to run."*
"Nice guy," Valin commented from the passenger seat of the *Falcon*.
"He's an Imperial, kid," Han muttered as his wife played politics. "They're all a bunch of stuffy windbags with an overrated sense of opinion of themselves."
"So they'd fall under the 'weak-minded fools' category?" Valin said innocently.
"Feel free to tell the guy to walk out of his office without his pants," Han nodded, wincing when Leia slapped his arm.
"Han!"
"Wouldn't it be easier if we just used the Force and convinced him not to help the Vong that way?" Seff Hellin, another one of the Jedi apprentices and passengers aboard the *Falcon,* said in a low voice.
"Yes," Han said. "But we're the good guys. Good guys can't just go around waving their hands and making people think as they do. Besides, Kam and Tionne would have my head if any one of you went dark on my watch."
"I really don't see what's so dark about it," Bazel 'Barv' Warv, the last of the three apprentices commented. "If it saves lives or preserves the peace of the galaxy, why can't we use a mind trick on him?"
"Danni, you're our resident Jedi, you tell them," Han said, quickly ducking out of the rising Jedi philosophical debate.
"What? I'm not even a full Jedi."
"I'm busy driving the ship."
"But it's on autopilot."
"Hmm…did you say something?"
Danni, for a moment, wished that Master Skywalker was in her place. Or that Kyp was in the ship with her. But noticing the attention of the three younger Jedi, said the first thing that came to her mind. "Would you really do *anything* to keep the peace of the galaxy?"
"What do you mean?" Valin said.
"Valin, let's use your sister as an example. Say in the distant future she goes dark and becomes the next Sith to rule this galaxy. You, and only

you, know with absolute certainty that that will happen. Will you kill her now, before she becomes a threat?"
"What! No!"
"Why not?" Danni said softly. "She'll go on to kill thousands in her rise for power. Many Jedi would die, even your friends in this rise."
"She's my sister! She's only twelve," Valin protested in distress.
"So you would have your limits. Bazel," Danni turned to the Ramoan. "Let's say a Yuuzhan Vong attack is being planned, one that will kill hundreds. And the only one who knows about it is a little girl of, let's say nine years old, from the Peace Brigade. She's Falleen so mind tricks won't work on her. Only by destroying her mind will you find out about where and when this attack is going to take place. Would you do it?"
Barv swallowed and shook his head, his beady eyes wide in shock that Danni would even suggest it.
"But little girls are different than an old man like Moff Flennic," Seff argued.
"So when is it okay?" Danni countered, her green eyes sharp. "As Jedi, where do we draw the line and what gives us the right? I may not be a full Jedi, but scientists face the same ethical questions as Jedi. Just like Jedi, we scientists have knowledge, we have power, and just like Jedi, we take an oath not to betray the trust that comes with such knowledge and power. People look to us to improve their lives, and that is what we *should* be doing. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. Just as there can be fallen Jedi, there can be scientists who forget what they are supposed to stand for. For example, Alema told me that the Galactic Alliance had been working on a virus that would destroy all Yuuzhan Vong life. It would end the war, it would prevent any more of our people from dying, but it would be just plain wrong in my opinion. As scientists we have a duty to discover how life works for the benefit of everyone, even if we absolutely hate someone else's guts. Captain Solo said it the first time. We're the good guys. Though the idea of 'good' is subjective, I'd like to think that someone who is good does his or her best to preserve *all* life as much as possible. And when it's our time to pass on, hopefully we will have left the galaxy in a better state than when we entered it. Yuuzhan Vong, Imperial, Jedi, they are all titles. But under each of those titles is a living, breathing, being to whom we should give the same respect we'd want shown to us, even if they deny us that respect."
"And that's why I let you do the talking," Han said wryly as Danni finished heatedly.
Danni blushed. "Thanks a lot. You're as bad as your sons."

"I would hope not," Han said with mock offense. He then looked to the young apprentices. "But you understand, right kids? The high-road isn't easy, but it sure has hell feels a lot better when the day is done. You start walking down that easy way, and it's a very slippery slope. Sure you can make your way back up, but why even put your effort into doing that when you didn't have to go down that slope in the first place?"
Barv, Seff, and Valin all looked contemplative at that.
Leia, who was waiting for the mini-lecture to be finished, finally spoke up. "Moff Flennic wants us to land at his regional headquarters on Yaga Minor. He was kind enough to inform us that he is already playing host to Yuuzhan Vong Sub-Commander Torkal Vorrik. Kyp's also detected a Yuuzhan Vong picket ship in orbit above the planet."
"Great," Han groaned. "So much for simple diplomacy."
"Hey, the high-road isn't an easy road," Valin mimicked.
Han made a face. "Remind me to shoot the guy who said that."
"This should be an interesting trip," Danni smiled. "I'll go inform Commander Green that we've arrived."
=}VI{= =}VI{=
It felt as if she had only just closed her eyes when alarms blared across the ship. Reflexively, Jaina immediately sat up and reached for her flightsuit. Then, she remembered where she was, and that she was still in her flightsuit. The ship, the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force Star Destroyer, the *High Dynasty,* suddenly rocked violently, and she heard an echoing din of something exploding. Grabbing her flight-helmet, Jaina tucked it under her arm and left the quarters that had been allotted for her. Red lights filled the corridor outside her room, and Chiss crewmembers were darting to and fro.
The door next to her room opened and Jag, in full Chiss uniform, emerged. The two shared a single nod and headed towards the hangar bay.
"Assistant Syndic Fel," Jag said over his wrist-comm. "Colonel Solo and I are nearing the hangar bay, your orders?"
"*The Reclaimer has returned and it brought friends. We were dragged out of hyperspace by one of the dovin basal mines I informed you about. It only targeted our ship and the Reclaimer is keeping us here. If I am unable to maneuver us free, all fighters have orders to launch. Colonel Fel, force Spike is yours again."*
As the doors to the side-positioned hangar bay opened, Jaina could see three Star Destroyers and several odd-looking vessels firing on their ship. It took her a moment, but she realized in horror that bodies were fastened to the outsides of these odd ships.

"Those are Vagaari marauder vessels," Jag said, instantly recognizing the strange ships.
"They are working with the exiles?"
"It would appear that way," Jag remarked, before the two separated for their fighters.
Jaina ran a quick system's check on her X-wing.
"Colonel Solo, your fighter will be designated Jedi One for the duration of this conflict," Jag's voice came over the comm. *"You will join Spike-Alpha for all maneuvers."* Then, on a private line. *"Let's hope your flying skills match that of the Chiss."*
"Getting a little cocky now that we're in your home territory, are we Colonel Fel?" Jaina retorted playfully. "I can still fly circles around you any day."
Before Jag could respond, his father's voice came through all fighter comm units. *"Force Spike and force Blade, permission to launch granted. Force Spike will engage enemy fighters and capital ships of opportunity. Force Blade will defend the High Dynasty's engines."*
As the *High Dynasty* emptied its complement of six fighter squadrons, the enemy fire intensified. Jaina followed Spike-Alpha through a blistering barrage of energy fire unlike any she had seen. In addition to the green lasers and blue masers being fired by the incoming enemy Clawcraft, yellow beams of light were flashing out at a rapid pace from the incoming, saucer-looking Vagaari fighters.
"Spike-Beta, take point. Engage Vagaari fighters." Jag directed. *"Spike-Gamma, engage enemy Clawcraft. Spike-Alpha, we have the Vagaari cruiser."*
"Roger, Spike Leader."
"Affirmative, engaging enemy Clawcraft."
"Heading to target now, Spike Leader."
Jaina was impressed with the skills of the Chiss pilots as they broke off in perfect unison to head towards their goals. Beta squadron swooped around the unshielded Vagaari fighters and swiftly annihilated the first two squadrons within a matter of seconds. Though Gamma squadron had to work a bit against the turncoat Clawcraft, it was obvious that their pilots were the superior ones as the oncoming enemy fighters were lit up one by one. By the way the members of force Spike were flying, Jaina could have sworn that they had either a Force bond or a yammosk directing their movements. Either that or they were just that damned good. The only time she had seen teamwork and coordination on the level she was looking at now was when she had been with Rogue Squadron.

Jaina refocused on force Spike's Alpha squadron and took note of the Vagaari cruiser they were heading towards. It was still covered in bodies, and through the Force, Jaina realized that all of the people strapped to the outside of the ship were still alive. She could make out the blue-skinned Chiss, humans, and various other races she hadn't yet encountered. She could swear that she could even see a Ssi-ruu strapped over the bridge.

"Jedi One, the Vagaari cruisers do not have shields per se," Jag said over a private channel. *"Spike-Alpha will dispatch the cruiser. Inform us if enemy fighters fall on our flank."*

Jaina sent a mental thanks to Jag before she remembered that he wasn't Force sensitive. After everything she had experienced, she didn't think she was capable of destroying the living shield this cruiser was using. Over the same channel she replied grimly. "Thanks Spike Leader. I'll watch your back."

The Chiss pilots apparently did not share her squeamishness as they let loose a barrage of fire. The space between the cruiser and the fighters lit up in a bright flare of green, and the cruiser exploded in a matter of seconds. Jaina closed her eyes briefly as she felt the despair and pain emanate of the living shield shortly before all the victims disappeared in the flare of incandescence.

"Force Spike, this is the High Dynasty. Concentrate your fire on the Reclaimer. Its escort is soaking up the oncoming fire."

"Orders acknowledged," Jag confirmed. *"Force Spike, form up on me."*

The three squadrons of Clawcraft did as ordered, falling into a spike-like formation with Jag at the very tip. Their target was the distant *Reclaimer*, which had two other Chiss Star Destroyers and a small flotilla of Vagaari ships in front of it. Immediately several squadrons of enemy Clawcraft and a whole host of Vagaari fighters honed in on the approaching three squadrons.

"Remain on course," Jag ordered calmly as energy fire began to splash across the deflector shields of force Spike.

Jaina realized that the tight formation they were flying in allowed for the fighters to share their deflector shields with each other. The fighters in the back were rotating with the ones in the front, ensuring that a full set of shields was displayed towards the oncoming fire. The level of precision flying, in the face of all the pressure, only impressed Jaina all the more.

Amazingly, with no loses, force Spike broke through the screen of fighters and capital ships and made a beeline for the *Reclaimer.* The three squadrons bombarded the Star Destroyer with everything they had, but it wasn't going down easily. All the worse, the enemy fighters

were now looping about and preparing to re-engage the fighter unit that had bypassed them.
For Jaina, the Chiss Star Destroyer was infuriatingly confusing to attack. It had no obvious bridge, hangar bay, or vulnerability of any kind. The Clawcrafts of force Spike appeared to be striking at the most heavily armored areas in an effort to wear away the metal plating and hit the vulnerable areas beneath it. But it was taking far too long.
Just then, two more Star Destroyers and several Chiss frigates were dragged out of hyperspace directly on top of the *Reclaimer*. These new arrivals immediately opened fire on the rogue Star Destroyer. This time the *Reclaimer* wasn't nearly fast enough. It had been softened by the pummeling it had received from force Spike, and now its shields collapsed completely. Gouts of flame erupted under the point-blank barrage, before secondary explosions ripped the cruiser from the inside out. Force Spike veered away as the *Reclaimer* detonated in a ball of flame. In the meantime, the Chiss frigates began chasing the Vagaari cruisers, but the alien vessels, as well as the remaining two enemy Star Destroyers, jumped out of the system in a flash.
"I'm getting tired of that happening," Jaina groaned.
"Force Spike, this is Colonel Fel, who is your force commander?"
Jaina's eyebrows rose at a voice that sounded like Jag's, only happier and more relaxed.
"Hello Chak," Jag seemed utterly bored at hearing his older brother's voice, he even adjusted the comm-channel so that Jaina could listen in on the conversation.
"Jag? Oh right, Wyn did say you were coming back. You were expected two days ago though so I didn't think you were coming. It's not like you to be late."
"We were delayed," Jag remarked sarcastically. *"Father is aboard the High Dynasty. He will no doubt want to know what has transpired."*
"Later, the Ascendancy wants to debrief father in person. My taskforce will escort the Dynasty the rest of the way to Csilla. Then we can have our family reunion."
"Understood."
"And I thought this trip couldn't get any more interesting," Jaina sent to Jag.
"Interesting only seems to begin to describe this trip. And we haven't even reached Csilla yet." Jag agreed in wry amusement.
=}VII{= =}VII{=
It wasn't the likeliest of teams. Mara, in the *Jade Shadow* with the rest of the Jedi Apprentices from the Shelter in tow, Anakin, Jacen, Tahiri, and Alema were joining forces with Waxarn Kel's Death Knights to

investigate a possible Yuuzhan Vong base on the border between Remnant and Wild Space. One Imperial ship had gone missing after shadowing a Yuuzhan Vong picket-ship. The second that had gone looking for it had also disappeared, and Moff Sarreti couldn't think of another explanation.

"You know, the more I read about Kalee, the more scared I become," Alema remarked sarcastically as the datafile given to them by Moff Sarreti scrolled across her X-wing's screen. *"The Kaleesh would be a perfect ally to the Vong."*

"They remind me a bit of the Sand People," Tahiri disagreed. *"Clan based and warlike, yet with their own rich culture and history. They wouldn't accept an alliance unless they were completely conquered."*

"Vong-Girl, these are the Yuuzhan Vong we're talking about. Completely conquering a native race is their way of doing things," Jalinae, one of Waxarn Kel's supporters said acidly.

Unlike most of the others, Jalinae used 'Vong-Girl' more as an insult than a term of affection. The war had hit Jalinae as hard as it possibly could. Captured by the Peace Brigade, she had been forced to watch the Yuuzhan Vong kill not only her parents, but her husband and only child right in front of her. A resistance group had interrupted the ceremonies before the Yuuzhan Vong could execute her too, but she was already dead inside. The meld on Mon Calamari had only eased some of the pain. She still harbored a deep grudge against all things Yuuzhan Vong. *"And since your Vong-pet told us that these Vong are not likely to be our friends any time soon, I'm almost hoping the Kaleesh threw in the towel."*

"Her name is Shaeri," Tahiri said through gritted teeth.

While Tahiri and Jalinae glared daggers at each other from the cockpits of their X-wings, Jacen was likewise finding himself in an argument with another one of Waxarn's supporters.

"How can you not hate them after what they did to you?" Balos, a Duros Jedi, said. He had been captured by the Yuuzhan Vong during the initial invasion and experimented on to the point of insanity. Though he had eventually escaped, his greyish-white skin was still covered in deep scars and blisters from the shapers' tests, and his normally red-orange eyes were a pale yellow. Even the meld hadn't been able to drain away all his hatred. *"They razed our home-planets to the ground. Tortured you. Tortured me! All because we wanted to live our lives the way we wanted to. Is it dark to want to stop them from hurting anyone else ever again?"*

"It isn't. But it is dark to kill them if they surrender. They are living..."

"They are nothing but animals! They deserve to be slaughtered like animals. Surrender? That's a joke. They have the blood of trillions on their hands, what right do they have to live? As Jedi we are the judge, jury, and executioner. It is our sworn duty to protect the people of this galaxy. And the Vong definitely are not from this galaxy. They're not even in the Force."
"The Force as you know it," Jacen said.
"Vongsense only is a perversion of the natural Force." Balos argued.
"The Yuuzhan Vong are nothing but savages who twist everything they touch."
Even Anakin Solo and Waxarn Kel appeared to be differing in their opinions as they flew towards their destination.
"Most of the Order see you as our next leader, but you'll forgive me if I withhold my judgment. The Order has little room for nepotism and egoists. Your uncle nearly led us to ruin, and there is no telling where you and your brother and sister will take us. You're good at taking risks, but careless with the lives of those who follow you."
"I do my best to bring everyone back. But this is a war."
"I'm sure Eryl will agree with you, but it doesn't change the fact that she died on your reckless mission and you didn't."
"Eryl Besa?"
"Eryl and Jovan were good friends of mine," Waxarn replied stiffly.
"They followed you because they believed in you. That blind belief got them killed. No matter how charismatic you, Jaina, and Jacen are, you're not all powerful, and it's time the three of you stopped acting like it."
"Acting like it? We<u>know</u>we're not all powerful. In fact, that's the last thing we think we are."
"Really? You're bossing around the High Council like you own it. Getting them to scramble at your every whim. Your big brother acts all high and mighty just because he can feel the Vong through the Force. Outside of your insular group, no one really knows anything about him. And don't get me started on your sister. Is she a Galactic Alliance pilot or a Jedi? She can't be both."
"Why not?"
"Look, you're either fully committed to the Jedi or not at all. It's as plain in simple as that. You can't be a Jedi if your loyalties are elsewhere."
Onboard the *Jade Shadow*, the younger occupants frowned in distress as they listened to the myriad of conversations.
"Aren't you going to say something, Master Skywalker?" Jysella asked softly.

Mara, however, shook her head. "It's better that they get those feelings out now than have them come up at the wrong point in time."
"But will they even work together after this?" Jedi Apprentice Yaqeel asked nervously, her snout twitching in aggravation.
"They will," Mara said confidently. "They're Jedi Knights after all. They know what they have to do to get the job done."
"Even Alema's arguing with Waxarn's people," Jysella sounded slightly surprised as she continued to listen in to the banter over the comm-system.
"Never thought I'd see the day when I would hear her defend the Yuuzhan Vong." Mara shook her head in amazement.
"Alema's not that bad," Jysella defended her friend. "What would you be like if Ben and Master Skywalker got killed right in front of your eyes by the Vong?"
Despite the chill her words created, Mara gave the young apprentice a warning glance. "It's different."
"Is it?" Jysella challenged, having bonded with Alema over the last few months to the point where she saw the Twi'lek Jedi as her role-model. Talking with Alema had also made her wonder why the other masters had let Alema suffer for so long by herself. "Alema lost Numa and had no one else for her. If it wasn't for Anakin and Tahiri, she'd still be drowning in anger and sadness."
"She isn't now?" Mara cocked her head curiously.
Jysella's expression went from challenging to pitying. "You really don't know her, do you?"
"Luke believed that she'd fall to the dark side eventually," Mara said, unsure why she was sharing her husband's opinion of the Twi'lek. "That her anger would consume her until it was the only thing left."
Jysella radiated a spike of disgust and disbelief, as she glanced back out the viewport. "And you were going to just let her fall? I'm glad Anakin, Tahiri, and my dad were able to help her. She's really cool once you get to know her. Not like any of you even tried."
"Jysella," the eldest of the apprentices in the ship, the Falleen Jedi, Natua Wan said in soft rebuke. "The war has preoccupied the minds of many. Master Skywalker cannot take the time to tend to every single one of us just because we become emotionally unstable. He had many more important things on his mind. Why do you think he finally ceded control of the Order to the High Council?"
"Doing so also allowed your father to recognize that Alema was having problems and act on it," Yaqeel pointed out, slightly subdued at the confrontational atmosphere in the shuttle.

Suddenly, Alema's voice, full of anger and annoyance, filled the comm-system. *"Jade Shadow, this is Alema. You have a stowaway on your ship."*
"Stowaway?" Mara repeated, unsure of what that had to do with anything or why Alema was irate. "I didn't sense anyone."
"I do. Kriffin' schutta. Come on out, Vergere. I know you're listening. And stay out of Jysella's head!"
"I was only bringing forth what needed to be said," Vergere said lightly, emerging from the shadows like a wraith. "As the young Master Skywalker said, it is better these feelings are brought out now than later."
"Vergere!" Mara set the ship on autopilot as she spun to confront the Fosh Force user.
"Greetings," Vergere said, bypassing Mara as if she wasn't even important. She playfully flicked the comm-unit back on. "And hello to you too, Jedi Rar, it is your move now. Our coming destination should reveal just which of us is the better player of our little game."
=}Chapter End{=
A\N: With this set-up chapter, Force Heretic Book 2 (kinda canon book 1) has begun. The winner of Vergere and Alema's little 'game' will be revealed in, oh, about three chapters, you definitely don't want to miss it.

ADA 39

Thirty-Nine
=}I{= =}I{=
"Grilled chicken," Alema pondered aloud as she dismounted her fighter's ladder. "Nah, broiled would be better. Or slow roasted. Then I could carve her up."
"What are you talking about?" Tahiri said with a puzzled expression.
"How to best kill and cook an annoying chicken," Alema narrowed her gaze on Vergere as the Fosh emerged from the *Jade Shadow*.
"Vergere?" Tahiri blinked in surprise. "What's she done to you?"
"Just keep her as far away from Anakin as possible," Alema hissed, her jaw clenching when Vergere placed a hand on Jysella's shoulder. She only relaxed when Jacen approached and Vergere sidled up to him.
"Frang it! I told her Jysella was off-limits."
"Huh? What?" Tahiri spun around as Alema went stalking away.
One of Waxarn Kel's Jedi scowled in annoyance when Alema shoved past him. "What's her problem?"

Tahiri could only shrug, completely bewildered by what had just happened.
"So, you decided to come along?" Jacen greeted his teacher. "Too much ocean wind on Mon Cal?"
"Too much of something is always bad," Vergere returned the greeting glibly. "But now that you are on the planet, you feel it, do you not?"
"This planet is strong in the Force," Jacen nodded. "But it's not a natural strength. It's darker. Coming from that temple we flew over."
The *Jade Shadow,* Death Knights and Anakin, Alema, and Tahiri, had landed on Kalee without incident. The Vongsense-abled Jedi directed the others to a moss-covered canyon that led into a very thick, tropical jungle. On the opposite side of the canyon, a massive step-pyramid stood out of the foliage, surrounded by flora-covered, towering, canyon walls. On one side of the temple was the jungle, on the other was a dried out riverbed. What caught their attention was the downed Yuuzhan Vong vessel half-embedded within the pyramid. The crash looked fairly old, but there were no other signs of life in the region. It also wasn't the only ship in the foliage-covered ruins. The remains of several Imperial ships were likewise embedded in the surrounding jungle, scattered throughout the length of the canyon. Adding to their worries were the powerful waves of dark Force energy that appeared to be emanating from the pyramid.
"Some of us will stay with the ships," Mara said. "I'll be one of them. Jysella and Yaqeel will stay too. Waxarn?"
"Half of my people will stay here with Master Skywalker and the apprentices," Waxarn agreed as Jysella and Yaqeel protested in the background.
"Waxarn and Anakin can lead the rest of us to that structure we saw," Jacen said, as the eldest apprentice, Natua Wan, stepped next to him.
"We'll keep in constant comm-contact," Anakin motioned to his comlink.
"Good luck," Yaqeel called out.
"Thanks," Anakin smiled.
=}II{= =}II{=
"Steak, medium-well," Han motioned to the waiter. "Greens on the side."
While his sons were tromping through the jungles of Kalee, he and the occupants of the *Millennium Falcon*, as well as Kyp's Dozen, were enjoying a luxury meal at the regional headquarters of Yaga Minor; located high in the snow-capped mountains. The view from the balcony was spectacular, with vast oceans on one side, and the sprawling array of support structures for the ship-yards in orbit. Despite Moff Flennic's

opinion of the 'Rebels,' he was still Imperial enough to believe that all official diplomatic functions should come with a 'wine-and-dine' segment. None of the 'Rebels' were complaining.
About the food, anyway. Their dining companions were another story. It was hard to enjoy a meal with a dozen scowling Yuuzhan Vong sitting across from you.
"So…" Valin said nervously, as the yellow, baleful eyes of a Yuuzhan Vong warrior bore down on him. "Do the Yuuzhan Vong play any sports?"
"Really, Valin?" Seff whispered. "Out of all the questions you can as…k"
"We do," the warrior responded, to both Seff and Valin's surprise.
"Really?" Valin blinked.
"We let slaves run free and hunt them down," the warrior answered. "It develops our tracking ability and lets us see how the slave species think. The one who hunts the most slaves has the same number sacrificed in his name to the gods."
"Oh," Valin blinked again. "Okay then."
"There's a conversation killer," Seff muttered.
In the meantime, Kyp seemed to be in a staring contest with another warrior; both the Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong keeping their features absolutely still and emotionless. It was like looking at two rock statues, as neither seemed to want to blink or move a muscle.
Bazel had already challenged a Yuuzhan Vong warrior to an arm-wrestling contest, explaining it was a challenge to show off one's physical strength in a single arm. Naturally, the warrior bit at any chance to show off his prowess. The two were at one end of the table being cheered on by some of Kyp's Dozen and a couple of other warriors.
Ryza Tyreed, a member of Kyp's Dozen, was actually in conversation with several other warriors. They had been impressed with her attempts to use their language, something she had learned from being around Tahiri and Shaeri aboard the *Ralroost,* and began to teach her more about the intricacies and slangs of the Yuuzhan Vong tongue.
And Shaeri and Danni were energetically talking with a group of Domain Vorrik Shamed Ones, all of whom were armed to the teeth and carried themselves with the same confidence of the Freed Ones outside their Domain.
It was an almost surreal experience as the two sides, which were normally enemies, were almost civil with one and other.
"Can you believe this?" Han said, shaking his head in incomprehension as he watched the sides mingle.

"Anakin, Tahiri, and Jacen have been saying it for a while, Han," Leia chuckled at her husband's wide-eyed expression. "The Yuuzhan Vong are people too."
"Hey, Vader, Jabba and Palpatine were people too," Han said, taking mock offense at her chuckle. "That didn't mean I'd be sitting down and eating with them any time soon. Well, maybe Vader, but I didn't have a choice at the time."
"Believe me, this is not what I would have preferred either," growled Sub-Commander Torkal Vorrik, glaring distastefully at the dish before him.
"Yeah, well, you can just get in your ship and take off if you don't like it here," Han snarked. "No one asked you to come to this galaxy."
Next to Han, Leia covered her face with her hands and shook her head.
"You are wrong about that, infidel," Torkal snarled, his lack of lips causing his sharp teeth to appear unnaturally long. "Our gods invited us to cleanse the cesspool you call a home. As distasteful as it might be, it is what they command."
"You're nothing but a bunch of blind, religious zealots," Han shot back, gesturing at Torkal and his warriors. "Can't you have an independent thought? If you don't like what your gods are commanding of you, get new ones."
Torkal pulled out a coufee, whirled it around, and embedded it into the steak the waiters had just brought Han. The entire table went quiet.
"Because you are an infidel, I will excuse the blasphemous words coming from your mouth. But if you so much as suggest something like that to myself or any of my men again, I will not be so forgiving."
Torkal yanked his coufee free and barked out several orders in Yuuzhan Vong. His men rose from the table and stormed out of the room after him.
All eyes turned to Han, who shrugged sheepishly. "What did I do?"
=}III{= =}III{=
"Toasted nerf number fourteen. *Su'cuy,* Kreda, you're out too," Doran said in sing-song. He had his lightsaber out and the Mandalorian in front of him paused at the deadly hum, shoulders slumping in defeat.
"*Haar'chak!"* The armored soldier threw down his blaster in disgust and took a seat.
"*K'atini,"* Doran replied with a smirk, using the phrase that Dinua had told him many times over during his own training on Gargon. *Suck it up.*
"How'd you know, kid? I even double-backed to throw you off." The Mandalorian removed his helmet to reveal a human in his late twenties.

"I knew you were going to double back so I never even followed in the first place," Doran chuckled. He glanced back through the trash heap. "Oh, and here comes the second unit. Let's see if they can do better than your group did. Please play dead."
Kreda mock-glowered at the teen, but did as told. He was lucky that *Mand'alor* had decided that these would be non-lethal training exercises; otherwise he would have been skewered on Doran's saber. He let out a small laugh as he watched Doran use the Force to leap onto a high tower of debris and out of sight. That kid definitely had guts.
The second Mandalorian training squad saw his prone form and slowed their approach. The group leader quickly sent out scouts in different directions to secure the area. Kreda winced at that. He had tried that tactic at the beginning of the 'hunt' for the Jedi, and it only allowed Doran to take out the scouts and reduce his unit by four before they had even seen him. Sure enough, only seconds later, more curses in Mandalorian went up. The second unit leader homed in on the location he had sent the last of his scouts, and the rest of the ten-man group hurried to that location. Blaster fire erupted, then silence.
"Lured them right on top of an anti-personnel mine," Doran said, crouching by Kreda.
The Mandalorian didn't even show surprise at Doran's sudden reappearance. "I appreciate the narrative, Jedi. You sure you got all of them?"
Doran pulled out a datapad which showed the view from a decrepit droid. The ten Mandalorians were covered in colored dye that indicated their passing. "Cobbled this together while waiting for you to come back."
"Cocky bastard." Kreda peered at the screen. Apparently, Doran had used his squad's own blasters, connected them to trip-wires, and let the members of the second unit doom themselves. The anti-personnel mine was also from the supplies of his unit, making the defeat all the more painful.
Doran clicked his comlink. "Jintar, I'm finished with my two. You?"
"What took you so long?" Another Mandalorian said glibly, emerging from the shadows. He tapped his helmet-comm. "Exercise is over boys. Congratulations, you were all killed by a pair of teenagers."
Doran chuckled and held out his hand. "You know me, I'm more of the waiting type. You probably just mowed down your two units, didn't you?"
"You know me," Jintar removed his own helmet, exposing his dark-olive skin to the harsh Raxis Prime air. He reached out and clasped Doran's

forearm. "I can see you've learned some new tricks since we last saw you. No longer that whining Jedi Dinua wanted to murder on a daily basis."
"She didn't want to murder me *every* day," Doran protested.
"Right, the other days she wanted to kiss you senseless," Jintar rolled his eyes and ran a hand through his messy, dark hair. "I swear, all of us in the training squad were waiting for the two of you to just get right to it right in the mess hall. Would have gotten rid of that awkward tension the two of you always had."
"You know this Jedi, Jintar?" Kreda said, as the rest of the Mandalorians began to arrive.
"Trained with him on Gargon," Jintar nodded. "*Mand'alor* had him paired with Dinua."
"And he's still alive?" Kreda blinked. "You're tougher than I thought, Jedi."
"Thanks," Doran said dryly.
With the rest of the Mandalorians present, Jintar stood on top of a scrap-heap. "So, can anyone tell me why forty *Mando'ade,* who want to be counted among the ranks of the *Or'ramikade*, couldn't even beat one Jedi Apprentice and myself?"
Silence. The Mandalorians present knew that complaining about Doran's unfair advantage with his Jedi powers wouldn't earn them any points. Mandalorians were taught to compensate for any disadvantage, but they had taken one look at Doran's tall, lanky form and had badly underestimated him.
"What's wrong?" Jintar said. "*Verd or'shya beskar'gam,* a soldier is more than his armor*. Mand'alor* taught you all that when you first came here. To be *Or'ramikad,* you have to treat every opponent as if they were the most dangerous one alive. Think that your opponent will always know your next move and prepare for it. Treat every engagement as if it were your last. You have blasters, vibroblades, missiles, and all sorts of things that can kill. But you also have a head. And if you don't use that, you're the one who is as good as dead. If we had been going by the usual rules, all of you *would* be dead. Based on your performances today, *Mand'alor* has given me authority to send five of you back to Sundari. And believe me, I want to send a whole lot more than five back; if only to keep your sorry *sheb*s, and that of your brothers and sisters, alive."
Jintar then went on to dismiss the five worst performers, including the leader of the second unit responsible for catching Doran.

"The rest of you, get your butts back to camp. We're going to repeat the exercise tomorrow two hours before sun-up, so you've better come up with a solution by then. If not, five more of you are going home."
Doran held back his groan until only he and Jintar were left. "Really, two hours before sun-up?"
"What are you complaining about? On Gargon, we had to wake up four hours before sun-up. I was doing you a favor."
"Jintar, Raxis Prime's days are twice as long as the days on Gargon, but the nights are twice as short!"
"*K'atini,"* Jintar said, giving Doran a friendly punch in the shoulder.
"I now remember why I hated you guys so much," Doran groaned, rubbing said shoulder.
"Hey, if you think you have it bad, what do you think Dinua is doing to your girlfriend?" Jintar draped an arm around the younger teen. Being two years older than Doran, Jintar had always treated Doran as a younger brother.
At that question, Doran tentatively checked on Sannah through their bond. He promptly recoiled. He didn't know how Sannah had managed to pick up so many Mando'a swear words in so little time, or how she managed to create some very colorful combinations with which she sent in his direction. "She's fine," Doran managed faintly.
"Right," Jintar chuckled disbelievingly.
"So…how has Dinua been?" Doran asked as they walked back to the barracks.
"Great. Still speaks of you occasionally," Jintar's voice was a bit guarded as he replied.
Doran immediately picked up on the reason why. "I never knew you had feelings for her."
The Mandalorian teen looked down at Doran in annoyance. "Your Jedi powers?"
"Sorry," Doran winced.
"No harm," Jintar said with a sigh. "And those feelings are only recent. She's become quite the woman since you've left. One of the best in the Supercommandos. All the old timers are already comparing her to her mother."
"That must make her happy."
"Heck no. It's only made her determined to make them see her as herself and *not* as her mother," Jintar laughed. "Because I'm the only one around her age, since you've left, I've kind of been the one she's gone to."

"Well, I've got Sannah, and I'm happy with her, so I won't get in the way," Doran said quickly. "You Mandalorians have always been a bit too intense for me anyway."
"Speaking of, really, how *is* your girlfriend doing?"
Doran only shuddered in response.
=}IV{= =}IV{=
An over-baked salted fish. Yes, Sannah decided, that was what she felt like. Stiff and sore, she couldn't remember the last time she ached so much, sweat so much, and bled so much, ever. She *thought* she had been in relatively good shape, Jedi katas normally helped to keep both the mind and body sound.
Boy was she mistaken.
It was clear that the name 'Supercommando' wasn't an exaggeration. When Dinua had removed her Mandalorian armor for the beginning of some light sparring, it had been hard for Sannah not to stare. The seventeen year-old, raven-haired human teen was *fit*. Not in the obscenely over-muscled kind of way, but in the extreme-athlete, rock-hard abs, I-can-run-several-kilometers-and-not-even-break-a-sweat kind of way. It was hard not to feel inferior to this older teen who had much more life experience and was obviously confident in her own abilities.
Determined to show Dinua that she was more than suitable for Doran, the Melodie teen had pushed herself to and over her own limits. And despite the cost, she seemed no closer to earning Dinua's approval than before. As she stumbled onto the *Kell Dragon,* her body was not so kindly reminding her just how stupid she had been.
Her hands were covered in bleeding blisters and newly forming calluses. Her hair was wild and free from their usual braids. Grime and dirt smudged her face and clothing. And every single muscle in her body, including the ones she hadn't realized she had, were screaming in protest of her every movement. And to think she still had an entire month of this to go.
She hadn't seen Doran in the week since she had begun her training, but she could feel him through their bond. The very fact that he appeared to be enjoying himself while she was slaving away like a mad-woman, caused Sannah to mentally repeat a few of the mandatory swear words Dinua had made her learn.
Swearing in Mando'a was allowed, but swearing in Basic earned her another fifty sit-ups and twenty squats.
Sannah staggered to her bunk, barely alive, not even bothering with a shower. The moment her face hit the pillow, she was fast asleep.

And then, as if she had only just closed her eyes, the alarm clock she had set earlier blared loudly above her head. Sannah groaned and somehow managed to drag herself out of the bed. It was still night, or very early in the morning depending on how one looked at it. Somehow, the five hours of sleep she had gotten didn't seem like it was nearly enough. As she pulled herself into the shower, other muscles that hadn't hurt the previous day, began burning painfully. If Sannah hadn't had the Force to help her out, she doubted she'd be able to do anything more than impersonate a jellyfish.

She showered, slipped into a fresh tunic, and then looked at her hair in the mirror. It was a wild mess and she had neither the time nor patience to re-braid it or let it dry. In the harsh training regiments of the previous days, her hair had also continuously gotten in the way. Making an executive decision with a determined bob of her head, Sannah reduced her shoulder-length hair to a pixie-like style similar to the one worn by Dinua. She stared at her new self with an approving nod and finished dressing.

She emerged from the *Kell Dragon* to find Dinua already waiting for her. Dressed in form-fitting exercise clothing, but with several weight bands around her ankles and wrists, Dinua was obviously ready to go. The young Mandalorian Supercommando had a bar of military rations in her hand and hefted it at Sannah. "Eat. You'll need your energy." Sannah caught the bar and stared at it suspiciously, wondering if it was poisoned; she wasn't sure if it was the oily and noxious atmosphere of Raxis Prime, or the green-brown, unappetizing appearance of the bar. But after the first bite, she found that she didn't care. After yesterday's exercises, she realized that she was famished. She quickly devoured the bar, which was flavorless and about as appealing in texture as it had looked.

"After yesterday's exercises, we're keeping things simple. Today, *dar'manda,* we're running the obstacle course," Dinua said without any introduction, as they began walking.

She had been like that all week. Not overtly cold, but definitely not friendly either. Sannah had clearly felt the Mandalorian teen's distain for her, and knew that she was probably not all that high up there in status in Dinua's eyes. Instead of actually calling her by her name, all Dinua had addressed her as was those two words, *'dar'manda'.* She had to 'earn' her name, Dinua had said. Until then, she would only be seen as a weak little girl.

Sannah felt a tic in her jaw as she recalled her previous day's exertions. Biting back her first choice of words, she tilted her chin up and smiled gamely. "Sure thing. When do we begin?"

"Now," Dinua motioned, and the two started off at a medium-fast pace. The route they were on took them through a meandering network of scrap and debris, with small hurdles or low ledges that forced them to duck at frequent intervals. Sannah followed Dinua's lead, rolling under these outcroppings of metal and wire, or hitting the hurdles at full stride.

"Look, it's been a week now," Sannah panted as she leaped over a particularly high hurdle. "What's the problem? I get that you and Doran were friends, so why can't we be friends too?"

"Friendship, trust, loyalty, they are earned, not given," Dinua replied shortly, not even out of breath. "Just because you are Doran's friend does not mean anything. Doran always was soft."

"There's nothing wrong with that," Sannah bit back. "Doran told me how the two of you met, how you parted. If he was so soft, why'd you become friends with him?"

Sannah nearly stumbled in surprise when Dinua turned towards her and smirked lightly. "There's nothing wrong with being soft."

They reached a towering wall, a dozen meters high, and pinned in by piles of junk that stretched even higher. Dangling from the wall were two strands of rope made of bundles of wire. They appeared to be the only way up. Dinua pulled out several strips of cloth and wrapped them around her hands. She then tossed another pair of cloth strips at Sannah.

"Those ropes will peel the skin right off you, don't slip," Dinua remarked, and she began to ascend the rope, relying on upper-body strength alone.

Sannah exhaled, glanced back up the length of the wall, then shrugged. If Dinua could do it, she could too. She wrapped up her hands and gripped the second rope. The cloth strips barely protected her blister and callus-worn hands from the cold, slick metal rope. Gritting her teeth, and grateful that the Force had soothed her already tortured muscles, Sannah hurried to make up for lost time.

From the wall, was a great gorge with a series of churning pistons powering multiple garbage smashers below. The only way ahead was to move up and down with each piston.

And there were no guard-rails to grab onto in the event of a fall.

Sannah got a sense of the rhythm of the machinery, and after another cycle, hopped onto the top of one piston, and then another. Dinua tackled a parallel set of moving pistons, agilely skipping from one to the next even without the Force.

They both landed on the opposite side, where a steep up-hill, at an angle of nearly sixty degrees, awaited them. The path up this hill was

completely made up of sand. Upon closer inspection, however, Sannah realized that the sand was actually very fine grains of metal and other debris that had been ground down and broken down by Raxis Prime's corrosive atmosphere
"Tell me about him," Dinua said suddenly, as they started uphill.
"Him? You mean Doran?"
"The last I saw him he was just a thirteen year old *di'kut.* Smart in some ways, but woefully ignorant in others."
"He hasn't changed much," Sannah remarked, grimacing as her ankles and calves protested the strenuous course. With the type of ground beneath her feet, it was like she was running in mud up a cliff.
"He has definitely become more of a man since I last saw him," Dinua said as they reached the top. "I can see why someone like you would be attracted to him."
"Someone like me?" It was hard to sound indignant when one was out of breath and had sweat pouring down one's face. She saw the next phase of the obstacle course and fought back a groan. A hand-crank was attached to a zip-line that stretched out across the vast wasteland of Raxis Prime's toxic junkyard. Any fall was most definitely lethal. The Mandalorians certainly knew how to keep one motivated.
"Compared to most of the Mandalorian warriors of your age, you are just a little girl." Dinua said coldly, when they finally made it to the other side. "A bright-eyed infant, naïve to the true workings of this galaxy. At least Doran, thanks to his adventures with his mother, knows what this galaxy is truly like."
"Don't get so high and mighty, you're only two years older than me," Sannah snapped stabbing a finger at Dinua. She had run out of patience with the Mandalorian teen.
The Mandalorian Supercommando was hardly intimidated and snarled right back at her. "When I was your age, my mother was murdered by the Yuuzhan Vong and I was adopted by one of *Mand'alor*'s most trusted men. At that time, I swore to become an *Or'ramikad* in her place. When you were learning how to float rocks and read minds, I had already gone up against Yuuzhan Vong and taken four lives by then! The fourth being one of my *Mando'ad* brothers who was still incapable of besting me in single combat after he forced himself onto me. When I was your age, I was teaching a Jedi apprentice who appeared to have nothing but looks and wit, how to better kill his enemies, and to survive in a galaxy full of death. I knew several different drinking games, exactly what I can use my body for, and how to kill a man in his sleep without leaving any trace of my presence. I was able to speak seven different languages, and understand nine. I

knew of both politics and court intrigue, as well as blaster and vibroblade. So you will forgive me if I am not as impressed with you, a fresh-faced babe whose hands are as soft and clean as the rest of her. Doran is far better off with someone like me at his back than you."
"I am far from helpless," Sannah hissed, gesturing and levitating a large engine part that had been in a trash heap next to them and sending it flying. Her anger at Dinua making her only hear the negative in her words. "You don't have to be a killer to protect someone."
Dinua was unimpressed. "Yes, your vaunted 'Force.' You Jedi rely so much on it, you're practically predictable. Without the Force, what are you, *dar'manda? Mand'alor* has drilled into us one thing over and over again. It's not the weapons, armor, or tools that a man has at his disposal that makes a man. To truly see what type of person he is, strip him naked and leave him on a hostile planet of which he has little knowledge of. You Jedi clothe yourself in the Force to the point where you make it define who you are, where you let the Force dictate all your actions and words. What are you without the Force? You are soulless. Without any identity whatsoever. If you want to be a true Jedi, one worthy of my respect, be a Jedi without your 'Force.' Then, and only then will I call you by something other than *dar'manda.*"
Sannah let out a slow, long breath. Her heated yellow eyes matching Dinua's unflinching brown. "No Force. Fine. For the duration of my stay here, I won't use the Force at all."
"Words are cheap," Dinua replied.
"Then I will show you," Sannah said, tilting her chin up. "I will show you just what sort of Jedi I am. I am Sannah, of the Melodie. Before this month is out, you will be calling me by that name."
A faint smile edged at the corner of Dinua's lips, but it disappeared so quickly Sannah was sure she had imagined it. Instead, Dinua took a step forward, standing toe-to-toe with Sannah. Slowly, Dinua raised a dark-haired eyebrow. "Prove it."
Sannah glanced back towards the rest of the obstacle course. "I will."
Meeting Dinua's challenge, the younger teen once more pushed herself, setting a much faster, grueling pace than before. She'd prove that she was more than capable enough to watch Doran's back.
Not for Dinua's sake, but for her own.
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Unlike the out-of-the-frying-pan-and-into-the-fire start of the journey, the rest of the trip to Csilla was wholly uneventful. It was clear that things wouldn't stay that way for long, though. When they reached the capital of the Chiss Ascendancy, there was no missing the large armada of Chiss frigates and their new Star Destroyers in orbit around

the planet. The swarms of Clawcraft zooming about, coupled with the heightened security, were obvious signs that the Chiss were expecting an attack.

Colonel Chak Fel had come aboard the *High Dynasty* to personally greet his father and welcome back his younger brother. Jaina had heard about Chak from Luke and Mara, but actually seeing him and learning of his light-hearted, if not slightly naïve, view of the universe, Jaina was amazed at how different Chak was to Jag.

"That's easy to explain," Chak had said good-naturedly, patting his younger brother affectionately on the shoulder. "This guy grew up in the Chiss military system, had all that loyalty and discipline injected into him to replace any other personality, like a good Chiss. All us older Fels on the other hand, Dav and…well, I guess I'm the only one left at the moment…any way all us older Fels grew up with the Empire of the Hand training. We just got that good old mix of Thrawn and Empire doctrines of honor and military rigidness. It's probably why the Ascendancy has me as far away from Csilla as possible chasing after the Vagaari. They're afraid I'm contagious."

Soontir seemed amused at her reaction to the differences between the two brothers and pointed out that his daughter, Wynssa was even more unique still. Jaina couldn't wait to meet Jag's younger sister. She was a source of both pride and aggravation for Jagged. Jaina could tell he loved her, but she could also tell she knew just what to say to drive him up the wall. At nearly fourteen years of age, she was at that point in life where Jag also had to start worrying about the various boys in her life. He had admitted to Jaina on more than one occasion that being Galactic Alliance space was a serious detriment in being able to vet any of her potential suitors. But Wynssa was just as smart as their parents, and knew better than to fall for the sweet nothings her suitors might whisper; or so he hoped.

"Chak will escort both you and Jagged back to our estate," Soontir said as the *High Dynasty* took its place in orbit with the rest of the fleet. "I will be in communication shortly. If you do not wish to be caught up in the internal matters of the Chiss, I suggest you complete what you came here to do as quickly as possible. Depending on how things go, the Ascendancy may become even greater isolationists than previously."

Jaina took her X-wing and was escorted by the Fel brothers' Clawcraft, down to the planet and to a modest estate half embedded within the glacial formation of Csilla's icepack. Their fighters were guided into a small hangar bay, where several Chiss welcomed them. Jag explained in a low voice that the estate was actually part of the Nuruodo family

military barracks. An arrangement that allowed Assistant Syndic of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force, Baron Soontir Fel, to keep in constant contact with the fleet he oversaw.
"I'll let Jag give you the tour of our house," Chak said amicably, as they waited for a tram-car to take them through the building's many tunnels and to their destination. "I've been chasing the Vagaari all over Ascendancy space for the last few days and definitely need to catch up on some sleep. I'll talk to you later, Colonel Solo."
"I look forward to it, Colonel Fel."
"Just Chak," Chak chuckled. "I only do the rank thing to keep my Chiss buddies from scowling at my lack of propriety."
"And they can scowl at my own?"
"Hey, they already think the military of the New Republic, Galactic Alliance, or whatever you call yourselves these days, is full of a bunch of undisciplined, backwater, backstabbing, inept, people. You'd hurt their feelings if you made them think otherwise. Now if you were from the Empire, that might be a different story. At least *they* are disciplined and competent." Chak grinned to let Jaina know he was joking.
"Although they're still backstabbing and backwater. Kind of stagnating by now."
"We will talk to you later, Chak," Jag said drolly. "I'm sure Wyn will enjoy hearing how you kept us all to yourself when we could be meeting her by now."
Chak paled, shooing them away as their tram arrived. "Go! Go! I want to get a good night's sleep and not wake up with doodles all over my face."
"Doodles?" Jaina smiled, glancing to Jag questioningly as they boarded the people-mover.
"When Wyn was eight, Chak and I made the unfortunate choice to get her upset while we were home on leave. When we went to sleep that day, she snuck into our rooms and gave us both…makeovers."
"That doesn't sound so bad."
"She dusted my entire face Chiss-blue, and drew red circles around my eyes," Jag remarked dryly. "Though I was a bit more fortunate than Chak. For him, she enlisted the help of our mother and he ended up looking a bit more feminine. Neither of us were aware of what she had done, and Wyn somehow got our father to tell the others to refrain from mentioning it. We went through an entire days' worth of drills without even realizing our new…look. She still has pictures of us on that day."
"I think I like her already," Jaina laughed aloud.
Jag just looked at her with a pained expression.

The two emerged from the underground tunnel that connected the hangar bay to the house, and Jaina shrugged off the warm jacket that had been supplied to her. It was a cozy military home, three stories with all the basic amenities and furnishing. On the far wall, a holo-image of the entire Fel family appeared.
"Davin and Cherith both died fighting the various threats of the Empire of the Hand," Jag remarked without emotion, though his eyes shown a bit more brightly than usual as he gazed on the smiling faces of his older siblings.
Jaina gently slipped one of her hands into his. "I can't imagine what losing one sibling would be like, much less two. I think I'd go mad if I ever lost Jacen and Anakin."
"You are much closer to your brothers than I was to Davin and Cherith," Jag tried to sound strong, though his hand did tighten around hers. "Military duties always kept the Fel family apart. Though, I had always admired Davin, and it was his abilities that inspired me to become a pilot…just like he was." Jag took a step closer to the hologram, his free hand passing through it whimsically. "Cherith died shortly before I was sent to assess the Yuuzhan Vong invasion of the New Republic. I was still dealing with the news of her passing when I left. In a way, my assignment was a relief. I could get away from the constant reminders of her and Davin. Refocus myself on getting to know a side of my family I never really knew, rather than focus on the family I had lost."
Jaina leaned into Jag in support, using the Force to gently undo the bundles of pain he had suppressed. He glanced at her appreciatively, seemingly understanding what she was doing even if he wasn't Force-aware.
"I guess we have another thing in common," Jaina said softly, sliding a hand into his. "In addition to being ace pilots, family means everything to us."
"That is true." Jag lowered his head to kiss her, but stopped when he became aware of an audience.
"Don't mind us, Jag," a voice said airily. "Kissing your girlfriend has to be much more important than letting your favorite little sister know that you've returned alive."
"Wyn," Jag said, arching an eyebrow at her as Jaina and he hastily stepped apart.
"Jag," Wyn said, quickly running to him and enfolding her arms around him in a fierce hug. "You're nearly three days overdue! I was afraid something had happened to you!"

"We were delayed," Jag said, rubbing her back awkwardly as he looked at Jaina helplessly.
Then, as if she was a completely different person, Wyn stepped back with a broad grin and gestured to a teen who had come with her and was now standing off to the side. "Glad you're back. Jag, this is James. James, this is my brother, Jagged."
"James?"
"The one I told you about," Wyn nodded brightly. "He was the one who actually decided to change the search parameters from extra planets to moons and other satellites. It's how we found what we were looking for."
"So you found Zonama Sekot?" Jaina tried to confirm.
Wyn nodded as she focused on Jaina, holding out a hand in greeting. "Yup, and you have to be Jaina. Unless Jag has another girlfriend on the side that he didn't tell me about."
"I am, and he better not," Jaina mock glared at Jag as she took the offered hand.
"I don't," Jag said drolly, shaking his head and fearing for his life as Jaina and Wyn grinned conspiratorially.
"I think we're going to get along just fine," Wyn said.
"That's what I was afraid of," Jag bemoaned.
"Shush, you're supposed to be happy that I approve of your girlfriend," Wyn chastised playfully. "Now come on, let me show you what we found."
Jag raised an eyebrow and glanced pointedly at James. It was apparent that James was a couple years older than Wyn. "You and Jaina can go ahead. I will have a little talk with James."
"Do your worse," Wyn said flippantly, causing James to wince behind her. "Dad and mom already threatened him with their most inventive deaths if he ever hurts me. You'll just come across all blustery and harmless compared to them."
Jag looked to Jaina again, and Jaina could help but laugh at the defeated expression on his face. Wyn was definitely a Fel; meaning that she wouldn't settle for anything else but a victory. Taking pity on Jag, Jaina stepped over to him and hugged him sympathetically. She then motioned to Wyn as she snagged her heavy coat again. "Here, you two can talk while we head over to your astro-nav area. I'll chat with James if he doesn't mind; see what it's like being one of the few humans within the Ascendancy."
"'That is acceptable,'" Wyn said in a fair imitation of Jag's voice. She happily skipped over to his side and gripped one of his arms. "Come

on, Jag. We have some catching up to do. You still haven't told me all about what Coruscant was like."
As the two Fel siblings took the lead down a different tunnel, Jaina rolled her eyes fondly and glanced towards James. "Shall we follow?"
"You're the Jedi," the younger teen shrugged, he didn't seem at all nervous. They began to walk after the Fel siblings.
"So, how'd you get to be on Csilla?" Jaina asked curiously.
James made an absent motion with his hands. "My adoptive parents were scientists working on one of the Empire of the Hand's cloning projects. They were killed in one of those many pointless battles that everyone seems to fight. A Jedi named Kirk Dekim found me and dropped me off here. End of story."
Jaina regarded James out of the corner of her eyes. At first glance, his eyes appeared a flat grey. But as they passed by a lighting fixture, she noticed multiple colors dance within the dim illumination. His hair was dark, nearly the same shade as Zekk's, with streaks of translucent white spread out intermittently in the messy style he wore it in. His skin was sheet-white, almost ghostly in shade, and there appeared to be some type of faded barcode on the side of his neck.
He noticed her gaze and he allowed a small smirk.
"Yes, I'm one of those clones if you were wondering. My adoptive parents apparently thought that growing a kid was better than having one. Didn't quite get the mixture right though. I'm sure you noticed that much." There was a great amount of bitterness in his voice at that. "I never knew my adoptive parents though. Spent most of my life in those accelerated learning and growth programs. Strangely enough, being around the Chiss is actually the first place where I felt normal. Where I wasn't stared at."
"Sorry," Jaina apologized.
"Don't be, my adoptive parents made me what I am," James said in disgust. He flicked his wrist and Jaina blinked in surprise when he levitated a nearby cargo crate. "Dekim taught me the basics. Enough to keep it under control. Didn't really feel like learning more. I'm perfectly happy as the Assistant Syndic of the Chiss Astro-Navigation and Reconnaissance branch."
"Thank you for helping us find Zonama Sekot," Jaina said, trying to change the subject. She felt awkward at the immense amount of bitterness flowing from the younger teen. "This discovery really could end the war."
"Don't thank me," James shrugged, seemingly embarrassed. "I wouldn't have done a thing if Wyn hadn't come to me with the problem."

"You and Wyn close friends?"
"She's the only one who bothers to come to the observatory where I'm holed up," James said with a nod. "Pretty much my only friend. We grew closer after several adventures a couple years back, when we went back to visit the facility I was…created…in. Had to battle all sorts of creatures and an insane scientist. She can definitely hold her own in a fight."
Jaina had a very odd moment of déjà vu involving another Force-sensitive orphan child becoming friends with a larger family and having unbelievable adventures as a result. She shook away those thoughts with a smile. "It's a good thing these Fels are an open-minded bunch."
"They do put up with a lot," James agreed, he grimaced slightly as he recalled the variety of dressing downs he had received from the younger Wyn when he had first arrived. The words 'thick-headed gundark' came to mind on more than one occasion. "We are definitely lucky people."
Jaina looked ahead to where Jag was patiently listening to Wyn prattle on about the war. "We sure are."
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"Do you think about them often?"
"Them?"
"The Jedi who went with you to Myrkr," Waxarn Kel said to Anakin as they pushed through the densely packed foliage. The sweltering jungle was oddly quiet and devoid of any other life besides the lush greenery all around them. And apart from the sounds of their group brushing past people-sized leaves and branches, the silence had become a bit too eerie for many. "Do you think of them at all?"
Anakin nodded once. "Every time I go out on a mission like this. You mentioned Eryl earlier…"
"She was amazing, a great friend. Like a little sister to me," Waxarn admitted softly. "She was an idealist. Always believing in putting the galaxy ahead of herself for the greater good."
"I'm sorry I couldn't bring her back alive."
"I am too," Waxarn murmured. "I met her right after I got these burns." He gestured to several older-looking scars on the side of his face. "A run-in with a voxyn that I just barely survived. Three others didn't. That acid was some pretty nasty stuff. I was the only survivor from the attack and was so full of rage, anger, guilt, all those little emotions that eat you from within. It just killed me that I survived and the others hadn't. And then Eryl comes along," Waxarn trailed off, his expression pained. "She comes in for a vibroblade gash some Peace Brigade punk left on her. Gets a bacta tank next to mine. We just started talking and

that rage melted away. Eryl just had that affect. Makes the worst situations brighter with just a smile and a comment."
Anakin could feel the invisible hand close around his heart once more. He hadn't known Eryl or half of the strike team too well, but he would always remember the fact that they had followed him out and he had failed to get them back. Of course Eryl and the others would have family, friends, those who mourned their passing. But with the war as it was, Anakin never really had a chance to track those ties down. For the first time, as he noted Waxarn's haunted expression, he was actually confronted with the damage his naïve recklessness had caused.
"Floating in bacta, there isn't much you can do besides talk," Waxarn laughed softly, absently pushing aside another overgrown branch. "We talked about our families, our beliefs, our desire to end the war. I told her about all the friends I already lost, how I was getting tired of losing all those important to me. Why I changed the name of my group to the Death Knights. I'm sure I got a little bit morbid at times. Even when she got out though, she kept visiting me, listening, talking, helping make those hours in the bacta tank a bit more bearable. At the time, just talking helped me more than I ever thought it could. In hindsight, I probably should have just kept my mouth shut."
"Waxarn?"
Waxarn's expression turned sour. "I was still getting med-treatment when you came up with your suicidal plan. Eryl, however, had already been out for a couple of weeks and was cleared to go. You know what she told me after she agreed to go on your mission?"
The older Jedi closed his eyes and shared with Anakin that very memory. In Anakin's mind, he could once again see Eryl, but through the transparasteel window of a bacta tank. Through the speakers, her voice seemed to fill his ears.
"*Cheer up, Kel. I'm doing this so we don't have to lose any more friends to those voxyn. So you don't have to worry about any of your knights while you recover. It's Anakin Solo who's leading us, so I'm coming back, promise. Then you can finally introduce me to all the Death Knights, and maybe change the name while you're at it. As long as your heart beats and you can smile like you do, you're definitely still among the living."*
The words echoed emptily in his ears as Anakin swallowed painfully, unable to meet Waxarn's eyes.
Waxarn hissed, his emotional shields failing for a second and letting out a small outpouring of anger and grief. "And then the mission happened, and you know how that ends. You and your friends get to live in a voxyn-free world, be the heroes, and Eryl gets a single holo-

image and a mention in some side-room memorial on Mon Cal that used to be a janitor's closet. I look at you and keep trying to see the hero that Eryl saw, the hero everyone else thinks you are, and I just can't see it."
"Outside of my friends, you'd be the first," Anakin said softly. "And I've definitely learned my lesson since then. I know no amount of apologizing will ever bring her back, but I'll never forget about her, or Ulaha, Jovan, Bela, Krasov, and Raynar. They're all constant reminders for me about what happens when I try to be more than I am."
"You're right," Waxarn whispered, exhaling and looking away. "Their deaths *are* your fault. The fact that we're *still* the Death Knights is your fault. But it's also the fault of Skywalker and the other Jedi for being so passive that you had no other choice but to do what you did. I've seen what you've done for the Order since then. You've made it loads better than it once was. But it still doesn't change the fact that only you and your friends made it out when others did not. That you took away the one good person I had, the one who was teaching me to care again after I had lost so many others. I'll work together with you Solo, I'll respect what you've done, but we'll never be friends, and I will *never* be able to forgive you. This goes for most of the Death Knights too. Any Order with you as its leader will not have the support of the Death Knights."
Anakin regarded Waxarn with a very long look, and then slowly nodded. "Understood Waxarn. Thank you for being honest."
Waxarn inclined his head. "You deserved that much, Solo. If you'll excuse me, I think I'll check on the others."
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Despite the fact that they were on opposite sides of the war, Valin couldn't help but be impressed as the Yuuzhan Vong warriors he was talking with performed a training exercise with perfect synchronization. The 'neutral' atmosphere within Moff Flennic's Yaga Minor headquarters had allowed for interactions that would have otherwise been impossible during a time of war. It was a strange feeling, knowing that the Vong around him were enemies, yet at the same time seeing them as actual people.
Throughout the two days of negotiations, Valin, Barv, and Seff had more or less gotten to learn about Domain Vorrik through countless interactions with the Yuuzhan Vong stationed at Yaga Minor. They had shared meals, work-out areas, conversed, and even joked together. Surreal was another word that came to mind. They were supposed to be fighting to the death, not making friends, yet, here they were, laughing and exchanging combat tips.

Even the older Jedi, those of Kyp's Dozen, appeared to be relaxing as they shared war experiences and philosophies with one and other.
"Wow, it's almost like you have a yammosk controlling you guys," Seff commented as the six younger Yuuzhan Vong warriors finished their exercise.
"We are crèche-mates," Sah Vorrik—one of the Yuuzhan Vong Valin and the others had been getting to know—remarked, sounding pleased. "We grew up training and fighting alongside one and other. Breathed the same air and ate the same food for our entire life. It is only natural that we think alike as well."
"So the six of you have known each other for what, eighteen years?" Sah blinked, mentally translating the time unit into his own language, then nodded. "Yes. Though Domain Vorrik is more extreme in their training, all Yuuzhan Vong domains train their warriors from crèche. It promotes unity and a sense of loyalty to one's domain. Do the *Jeedai* not have similar practices?"
"Not really," Valin shook his head as they made their way through the hallway out to one of the many hiking trails that surrounded the mountain estate. "The moment someone with Force-potential is found, they are taken to the academy and trained. Once they have learned all the teachers can teach them, they leave to help bring balance to the galaxy. If there is more than one student at a time, Force-bonds *can* form, but it all depends on the relationship of the students to each other."
"It is no surprise, then, that your Order is prone to fracturing," Sah said, as both the Yuuzhan Vong and apprentices began a light, early morning jog. "If loyalty only forms by chance, and you are all scattered, there is nothing to tie the *Jeedai* together as a whole."
"That's what the Jedi Council is for," Valin said. "They're our conscience, so to speak, guiding the Jedi and assigning them duties. We trust their wisdom and in exchange, they ensure that we are helping the galaxy as best we can."
"I would still prefer the life of a crèche, to your 'classes' of *Jeedai*," Sah shrugged. "I know, without a moment's hesitation, what any of my crèche-mates would do. We live first and foremost for the glory of the Yuuzhan Vong, and second to our domain. Those of Domain Vorrik are unified in purpose and thought. We are the hidden arm of the Supreme Overlord. He gives us a command and we follow, knowing that we are bringing honor to our Domain and our people. Can you say that all your fellow *Jeedai* would return the same dedication to the Order they serve?"

"Don't you think there's a difference between loyalty and blind obedience?" Valin asked. "Your leaders couldn't care less about the wellbeing of you and your crèche-mates. To them, you are tools, living weapons."
"And we know," Sah replied, his cadence matching the rhythmic fall of their feet. "We know and we accept our role. Just as you *Jeedai* allow the Force to guide you, we believe that our gods guide our own actions. The other day you told me that you were born to serve the Force. Well, *we* were born to ensure the strength and wellbeing of our race."
"At the expense of other races?" Seff asked from the back.
"If they do not strengthen us, yes."
"I think that's one of the main differences between the Yuuzhan Vong and Jedi," Valin pointed out. "You take other races to strengthen your own. The Jedi strengthen *all* races the best they can and are stronger for it. There's having allies and having slaves. Both can be relied upon, but allies help more in the long run."
"Allies can betray you," Sah argued. "Domain Vorrik was one of the many vanguards of our race into your galaxy. We helped to sew the necessary seeds that saw friends turn on one and other. That saw alliances break down. When the Yuuzhan Vong launched our attack, everyone retreated into their own corners of the galaxy. Where were your allies then? When the Supreme One and Tsavong Lah decreed that all *Jeedai* were to be hunted and killed, what became of all the people you had helped? Slaves, at least, can be controlled. They know their place and that their lives depend on your benevolence."
Valin glanced sidelong at the Yuuzhan Vong warrior. "If you had a choice, Sah, would you have come to this galaxy?"
"'Choice,' that is such an interesting word in your language. Interesting for a *Jeedai* to say as well. If the Force controls your movements, do you truly have choice? Can you choose to disobey the commands given to you by your Force? As a Yuuzhan Vong, born of the Domain Vorrik, I can no sooner choose my own fate than I can choose the domain I was born in. I am a warrior for the Yuuzhan Vong—that life is all I know. The three children I have fathered with my breeding partners will be warriors of Domain Vorrik and will fight and die for our people. I cannot be a Shaper, a Shamed One, or a member of the Intendant caste. The Yuuzhan Vong of other domains fill that role. It is my desire to bring glory and honor to myself, and thus enrich my domain, but I have never had a choice otherwise. The gods deemed that the Yuuzhan Vong should come to this galaxy, so I obey. Just as you would have obeyed if the Force had called you out to our own."

Valin didn't have a counter-argument. It was true that the Jedi followed their instincts, the Force, almost to the same degree that the Yuuzhan Vong followed their gods. The Force wasn't exactly a religion, yet, from a young age, all Jedi were taught to let the 'Force flow through' them, to guide their actions. It was moments like this when Valin wondered why the two sides had to fight in the first place. Why this war had to churn up the young men and women on both sides of the conflict, all because of the beliefs of the ones in charge.

As the sun rose above the mountain peaks and the apprentices and young warriors continued their joint exercise routines, for the first time, Valin saw the Yuuzhan Vong as more than just a faceless enemy. Just as the Freed Yuuzhan Vong had taught him that not all Yuuzhan Vong were the same. Sah and his friends were teaching him that, despite the fact that they were enemies, even the Yuuzhan Vong who were his enemies were also people. It was so easy to go into war thinking that the lines between friend and foe would be clearly marked. That Sah was a bad guy because he was part of the group that had come to conquer the galaxy, and Master Durron and the others were good because they wanted to protect it. But now that Valin had actually talked with the warriors of Domain Vorrik, gotten to know how they were raised and how they thought, those lines weren't exactly clear anymore.

He wanted the war to end, of course. But not if it meant that the Yuuzhan Vong under Shimrra would suffer needless deaths. It wasn't their fault that they were fighting—it was how they had been raised. Just as a Jedi had various doctrines and lessons about what was right and wrong; Sah and the others too had been trained to think of a certain way from the day they were born. Valin had no doubt that, if the Yuuzhan Vong leadership had decided to stop fighting, Sah and the others would lay down their arms as well.

And for the first time since becoming an active participant in the war, that was what Valin truly wanted. For Sah and the others to live on and have a chance to be something other than warriors of Domain Vorrik. Since Domain Vorrik stood in direct opposition to the Jedi and the Empire, however, it was very likely that Sah and his crèche-mates wouldn't live to see that day.

Valin never felt so conflicted before, and his frustration was echoed by both Seff and Barv. They wouldn't go so far as to say that Sah and the others had become their friends. But they wouldn't want to meet Sah in battle either. They had come to learn so much about each other. It was just unfair that the war had to make them be on opposite sides.

"I have a gift for you, *Jeedai*."

"A gift?" Valin paused and glanced askance at the warrior. "I'm sorry, I don't have anything for you."
"That is fine. Take this," Sah held out a small pendant. Carved into a hexagonal piece of black stone was an intricate, angular, series of lines; like the web of a spider or the shape of a snowflake. There were tiny, almost microscopic, translucent gems embedded at various intervals, causing the pendant to emit a brilliant array of color when the sun hit it right, despite the pendant's colorless form. "It represents the True Way. Binding together all life under the Yun'o. It is easily misunderstood. At first glance, our way of life may appear bleak and distasteful to others. But when seen in the right light, a vibrant life is revealed. Very similar to your Force, do you not think so?"
Valin held the pendant respectfully, bowing his head in thanks. "Thank you for the gift, Sah. And you are right, the True Way and Force have much in common. But, respectfully, I could never follow a way of life that would call for the deaths of those who don't see the pendant as anything more than a black slate of rock."
"And I accept your opinion," Sah said evenly, as if he had expected it. "That is why you have your own way and we have ours. Why we are enemies in this conflict. We each have our own code to follow. As similar as they are, they cannot be reconciled through our current interpretations."
"Which is a shame," Seff Hellin said, sporting a similar pendant given to him by one of the other warriors. "If we got new interpretations, we could have been friends."
"Indeed," Sah replied. "But it is not so, and enemies we are forced to be."
=}VIII{= =}VIII{=
"And I thought I had enough of jungles after Borleias," Alema huffed, pushing through the lush foliage around them.
"It's even hotter," Tahiri agreed, pulling at the collar of her Jedi robes as they walked point. "Not as muggy though, so that's a relief. You want to tell me what that thing with Vergere was about? If looks could kill, she'd be dead half a dozen ways from your glares."
"It's nothing," Alema said.
"Alema," Tahiri said evenly, brushing aside a large branch.
"Look, I don't have any proof and I don't want to cause any trouble," Alema replied. "Just forget it."
"You told me to keep Anakin away from her," Tahiri pointed out. "If she's a danger to him…"
"She isn't," Alema shook her head. "She already has her claws in another Solo. Anakin's more of an amusement for her."

"In another…you mean Jacen?"
Alema took a deep breath. "Tahiri. For your sake and mine, forget everything I said. Don't get yourself mixed up in Vergere's games. She's more than she appears and less than she pretends to be. I'll handle her, you just concentrate on being there for Anakin."
"Who's watching *your* back then?"
"Will you just drop it?" Alema snapped back in a hiss. "None of you Jedi can play the games Vergere is playing. You don't have the stomach."
"Try me."
Alema looked back to the rest of the group to make sure they were out of ear-shot. She then used the Force to trap the air between them so that only Tahiri would hear her. Stony green eyes met confused green ones.
"You remember that facility on Mon Cal. The one that was destroyed and kept me from joining you all on Ebaq Nine. I killed everyone there. Dif Scaur, the scientists, everyone. Not the Vong prisoners."
Tahiri's jaw dropped. "What?!"
"And earlier, back on Coruscant when we were rescuing Jacen. I skinned that Vong commander who was chasing us. Skinned him alive and planted his head on a metal spike in the middle of the lambent field."
"Alema," Tahiri swallowed, eyes bulging as she looked at the Twi'lek in a new light.
Alema said levelly. "Stay out of the game between Vergere and me, Tahiri. My hands are already stained. Yours don't have to be. You and Anakin are my only friends. Jysella is like the kid-sister I always wanted. I'm going to do anything and everything to protect all of you."
"And if it leads you to the dark side?" Tahiri whispered.
"Then I'll go dark," Alema replied. "I'm not afraid of the dark side anymore. I haven't been for a long time. You just keep on loving Anakin, keep on being happy with him. I'll be content enough knowing that you have each other. Vergere has shown me that there are dangers far worse than the Vong lurking about in this galaxy."
"And what are you going to do about them?" Tahiri said, unable to believe what she was hearing.
"After this mission," Alema motioned towards the distant step-pyramid. "I'm going to follow Master Horn's advice, leave and find my own way in this galaxy. I'm not a Jedi. I never was, probably never will be. Anakin knew that and still did his best to make a place for me in the Order. Because of that, because I love him, I won't be a Sith either. I'm simply Alema Rar, someone who will make people regret screwing up

the galaxy even more than it already is. Especially since all of you are trying so hard to fix it."
Tahiri reached out and gently took one of Alema's hands. "No matter what, Alema. No matter how dark you go. Anakin and I will *always* be your friend. We'll always have your back. You remember that, okay?"
Alema blinked painfully and sniffled as she nodded. "Yeah. I will. Now come on, enough with this serious business. We have Vong to kill and a dark nexus of Force energy to dissipate."
Tahiri yanked hard on the hand she was holding and pulled Alema out of the way as a spear whisked through the air and embedded itself into a nearby tree.
"Vong to kill, nexus to dissipate, and locals to avoid," Alema amended, jumping back as a spear entered the ground at her feet.
More spears were hurled from the thick foliage, and both Jedi quickly began dodging or redirecting the deadly projectiles. Jacen, Anakin, Natua, Waxarn, and the five other Death Knight pilots hurried to help out.
"We're here to help!" Jacen called out, using the Force to stick several spears into the ground. "Stop attacking, we're here to help!"
Shouts rang out from the jungle as several of Waxarn's knights used their lightsabers to cleave apart incoming spears. "*Jedi*!"
At once, the attacks ended and the presence of the attackers seemed to fade away.
"What was that about?" Jalinae said, checking on a torn piece of her red flightsuit with distain.
"No idea, but they're heading back towards that pyramid," Waxarn muttered, tracking the group with his senses.
"Kaleesh spears," Maez, one of Waxarn's knights observed, pulling one free of a stump. "This one's already blood-stained. Blood's dry though."
"Wait a moment," Nixa, a Trandoshan Jedi hissed, reaching out to grip Maez's arm. "Ssshow that to me."
Maez held up the spear. Everyone watched as Nixa held his hands alongside the dried blood coating the blade. He opened his eyes again, detached the head of the spear, and embedded it into the ground.
"There was a dark Force presence within that blood. A poison."
"The Force does allow for the introduction of poison into one's body," Vergere said, appearing at Jacen's side.
"You would know," Alema said acidly.
"I would," Vergere replied civilly. "But the technique used on whoever's blood that was is different than the one I use. I alter the chemical components at a molecular level. The technique required to poison another uses what some might say is the dark side. I am unaware of

the precise mechanisms to accomplish such an attack, but I believe that a practitioner would use his or her own ill-will to negatively affect the biology of their victim. The body of the victim, in essence, poisons itself."
"Thank you for the lesson on the Force, Vergere," Jacen said patiently. "But we still have to figure out why the Kaleesh attacked us and why they have Force-tainted blood on their spear."
"And why they're heading back towards that pyramid, which is pretty much a giant dark-side beacon," Waxarn said. "We're still a good kilometer or two away, but I can definitely feel the miasma it's giving off."
"I think it's what's also accelerated the growth of this jungle," Jacen agreed. "Even the nature feels twisted and warped."
"All who still votes to head for the Vong-ship-pyramid mash-up being guarded by spear-throwing, dark side tainted Kaleesh, raise their hands," Alema said drolly, she got a few chuckles and half-hearted hand raises as the group resumed their trek.
"I have to wonder about that. Are we Jedi just naturally attracted to things that might kill us?" Tahiri commented with an eager grin.
"Life would be boring otherwise," Si'ada, a dark-haired human Knight following Waxarn, chimed in. From Sernpidal, she had been orphaned shortly at the start of the war at the age of thirteen. As a Force sensitive, she had latched onto Waxarn and his group to replace the family and friends she had lost. Now sixteen years old, Si'ada was almost the same age as Tahiri, but with an exact opposite attitude towards the Yuuzhan Vong. She was not as bitter as the rest of the Death Knights, but still couldn't forgive the Yuuzhan Vong for killing everyone she had known and for destroying her home planet.
"We need to get a much safer occupation," Waxarn said light-heartedly.
The group continued to lightly banter amongst each other as they walked through the jungle, mostly to keep the nervousness they were feeling at bay. Jacen, Anakin, Tahiri, and Alema, didn't exactly get along with Waxarn's group, but they were all Jedi and could put aside their differences to work together. Vergere appeared to both help and hurt this teamwork—offering sage advice but at the same time always inserting a sly comment that would once again remind the two groups of knights of their political and philosophical differences.
Natua Wan, in the meantime, took it all in with a keen eye, quickly identifying how the group dynamics played out. She may have been an apprentice, but she was also the same age as Tahiri, albeit a couple months younger. Falleen also matured faster than humans did, so it

was really only Tahiri's connection to Anakin that had allowed the blond Jedi to go to Myrkr instead of herself. Natua held no ill-will towards Tahiri, though. The Force allowed everything to happen for a reason. And now, she was being allowed to tag along and learn from some of the best and most skilled knights the Order had to offer. Despite the obvious danger of the mission, Natua couldn't help feel a small amount of pride at the opportunity.
"Look," Vergere's voice stopped all conversation, though the Fosh had barely whispered.
The Jedi did indeed look around and were startled by what they saw. They were at the edge of what had once been a village that surrounded the massive pyramid. Instead, vines and trees grew out of moss-covered structures. Houses had collapsed, and the skeletons of the occupants were plainly visible. There was no other sign of life in the village beyond the abundant foliage.
This close to the step-pyramid, they could also feel the powerful waves of dark side energy flooding out of the structure. The energy was so strong it was visible in the form of a black, smoke-like haze, just centimeters above the ground. The tendrils of the haze dissipated the moment they reached the perimeter of the village, but their effects were still tangible enough. Beneath the haze, all across the jungle floor, they could make out many more bodies, already being covered and consumed by thick vines.
Above, the remnants of the Yuuzhan Vong vessel stuck out of the pyramid like the arm of a sundial. In fact, whatever super-accelerated growth that was affecting the plants, had also affected the yorik coral. The coral of the ship had actually stretched out and was beginning to encompass a part of the pyramid into itself. Though the crashed Yuuzhan Vong ship couldn't have been more than a couple of months old, the moss, vines, and other plant-life engulfing the city, made it appear as if the crash occurred centuries ago.
"We have to go into the pyramid, don't we?" Alema groaned.
"I can definitely sense Yuuzhan Vong in there," Anakin confirmed.
"There's also something else in there," Waxarn said, focusing his senses on the structure. "The dark side is too thick for me to get a good reading though."
"Anakin," Jacen briefly motioned for his brother to step away from the rest of the group.
"Jace?"
"Anakin," Jacen began in a low voice. "I don't think Waxarn's people can handle the miasma coming out of the temple."

Anakin glanced back towards the haze, his conversation with Waxarn fresh on his mind as he nodded slowly. "Their pride won't let them back down though, especially if we're the ones telling them. There *are* also Yuuzhan Vong in that pyramid."
"I don't think we should bring Alema into the pyramid either," Jacen added carefully. "I know she's your friend, but…"
"She can handle it," Anakin said. "We've encountered a dark nexus like this when we were training."
"Are you sure?"
Anakin nodded once. "I am. But I agree with you about Waxarn's knights. Bringing them in won't lead to any good. Unfortunately, if we tell them to stay outside, they'll probably come in anyways. The best we can do is bring them and keep an eye on them."
Jacen winced. "You're right. There really just isn't any way I could think of either. I mean, we can give them the option…"
"Yeah," Anakin grimaced. "I can try to think of something, like send Natua back with the most vulnerable of them, but other than that I can't think of any way to get them to back down."
"We're going to regret this," Jacen said, exhaled loudly as he stretched his back.
"Nothing we can do about it now."
Both Solo brothers returned to the group. "After we let Master Skywalker know of our progress, we'll go explore that pyramid."
"We'll be going in with our battlemeld fully active," Anakin said after his brother. "We may not be in a space fight, but the meld should ward off the effects of the miasma coming from the pyramid. If at any time you begin to feel overwhelmed, take one of the others in the meld with you and fall back. We don't know what's inside so we don't want to take any risks."
"Anakin," Natua spoke up. "Both Si'ada and I have decided to stay out here. What's coming from that pyramid is already more than we can handle."
"I too will stay," Vergere said, eyeing the miasma as if it was going to reach out and grab her. "I am not as young as I once was and do not think my old bones are up for this adventure."
Anakin nodded. "Okay, then you three keep an eye out and let us know through the meld if anything starts going wrong."
"As you desire."
"Understood."
"Sure," Si'ada agreed after a nod of approval from Waxarn.
"Alright," Jacen looked to the others, and then turned back towards the pyramid. "Let's go."

=}Chapter End{=
A\N: For those fluent in Mando'a I know *dar'manda* is reserved for Mandalorians, the reason Dinua uses that to address Sannah will be revealed later on. The next chapter is an action packed chapter as things start to fall apart for everyone, with a couple of surprises in store. It'll be up on Sunday as planned.
JediMasterDraco: Vergere lives into the sequel. (Please get an ff.n account! It's so much easier to reply to your epic-length reviews if you have one).

ADA 40

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"I don't believe it, this is it!" Jaina exclaimed, looking through the data both James and Wyn had managed to collect. "I can't believe it actually exists. Zonama Sekot!"
"We won't know if it's still there until we check," Wyn said. "And that area doesn't have any stable or known hyperspace corridors."
"Until '*we*' check?" Jag arched an eyebrow at his sister.
"Come on, Jag. You can't keep me out of this, not after all the work you made me do to find your moving planet," Wyn pressed.
"Father will never approve," Jag shook his head. "And neither will mother."
"But…"
"Wyn, you've helped a great deal," Jaina said. "But the trip there will be more than dangerous. You said it yourself, there aren't any stable hyperspace corridors leading to that area of space. We might not even make it there if the corridor we're traveling on suddenly collapses. Just know that you and James played a vital role in ending this war."
"Ending your war, maybe," a new voice sounded through the astro-navigation lab.
"Chief Navigator Aabe?" Wyn looked up in surprise.
The human officer had his hands clasped behind his back and was flanked by a small contingent of Chiss. "Whatever you discover, Wynssa, you are only helping the Jedi end the Galactic Alliance's war. It is not a Chiss war."
"What are you talking about? It's the entire galaxy's war. If we don't stop the Vong now, they'll eventually come to the Ascendancy," James argued.

"But it is still not a Chiss war," Aabe repeated. "And provoking the Yuuzhan Vong will not help any. If the four of you can come with me peacefully, we can do this in a civil manner befitting of the Chiss."
"Come with you? Why?" Jaina said.
"Wynssa and Jagged Fel, and James, are part of the Ascendancy. The Ascendancy has no diplomatic ties to the Galactic Alliance. Giving privileged information to them from the Chiss databanks is akin to treason."
"They were only old star charts," Wyn protested.
Aabe removed one hand from behind his back to reveal a blaster. He aimed it at the younger Fel. "Treason is treason. Now please come with me, I insist."
"That was a mistake," James said in a low voice, his grey eyes becoming prism-like as his emotions began a slow boil.
"A mistake?" Aabe tilted his head in amusement.
"To point your gun at her," James said with silent anger, he held out a hand and there was an audible snap as Aabe's weapon arm was suddenly bent at an unnatural angle. The Chief Navigator let out a gargled yell and collapsed to his knees, cradling his broken limb.
"Kill them!" He managed to rasp out. "Kill them all!"
The Chiss contingent opened fire, but Jaina, Jag, Wyn, and James were already diving behind the rows of computers. Monitors sparked and flared as blaster bolts filled the spacious room. From the upper landing, a second unit of Chiss burst in and added to the deadly fire. More computers erupted.
Jaina pulled out her lightsaber, its blade sparking as it deflected a multitude of deadly red beams. "Are those two places the only way into this place?"
"And out!" Wyn confirmed, from her position pressed protectively against James' chest.
Jaina looked around the room. Seeing a weak portion of wall just below a large projection screen, she motioned to it and shouted over the deafening din of a dozen shrieking blasters. "Jag! Give me some cover. I'm going to take out part of that wall!"
Jag drew his blaster and nodded.
"Can I do anything?" James called out.
"Keep my sister safe," Jag replied shortly. He shoved his blaster over the desk and lay down a spray of blind fire.
James glanced at the upper landing. With another motion, he lifted two Chiss off it and let them flail their way to the bottom floor.
Jaina promptly took off for the wall, sliding behind a podium amidst a hail of blaster fire.

Jag saw a Chiss soldier attempting to flank his position and stitched the soldier with several well-aimed shots. Unfortunately, the other Chiss were also good shots and several bolts hit Jag in the chest, shoulder, and arm.
"Jag!" Wyn screamed.
"Stay down," James said, diving from their cover to where Jag was. He picked up Jag's blaster and fired at the nearest commando.
"If you're going to do something, Jedi, do it fast," James called out. He jerked his head once, and a Chiss guard running towards them toppled over with a broken neck.
"The wall's cut out," Jaina yelled over the din.
James sent Jag's unconscious form darting across the ground like a bullet. He then made his way back to Wyn and the two sprinted towards the podium. The Chiss attackers were filling the room.
A blaster bolt narrowly missed Wyn's head.
James glanced sharply over his shoulder and saw that Aabe had picked up the blaster and was using his off-hand. James' eyes almost glowed in the red light of the blaster fire as he concentrated on the human. He snapped his fingers once, and Aabe collapsed to the ground, victim of a brain aneurism.
"Come on!" Jaina yelled.
James shook himself from his anger and dove through the hole Jaina had created. Wyn and Jaina had already loaded Jagged into one of the trams that traversed the underground tunnels on Csilla. The cloned teen scrambled onto the tram, and Jaina hit the controls.
As the first of the Chiss attackers emerged from the room through the hole, the only thing they saw was the rapidly disappearing tram.
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Just making the several dozen meters through the abandoned village, and to the Kaleesh pyramid proved to be an arduous task. The miasma was causing everyone to experience visions, hallucinations, and all manner of madness.
For a split second, Anakin believed himself to be on Dagobah again, on the verge of encountering his greatest fear within the dark, strong in the Force cave. He would take a step forward and see himself, only much darker, staring back at him. A second later, he was back on Kaleesh, panting heavily and drawing on the meld to stabilize himself. Only there was no meld and he was the only one present. Alone and isolated.
Jacen was convulsing in pain, he was again on Yuuzhan Vong held Coruscant, strapped to the Embrace of Pain, unable to move. Pain and droning teaching filled his mind, the powerfully dark core of Coruscant

reaching up to consume him, to shape him into something terribly greater. Then the pain was gone, the dark, durasteel world of Coruscant replaced by the bright and vibrant world of Kaleesh. But the plants were the only other lifeforms he could sense. There was no sign of any of the other Jedi, or any of the Yuuzhan Vong in the pyramid. It was only him and this mysteriously dark world.
Tahiri was whimpering, thrashing as she was force to relieve her Shaping. The tools of the Yuuzhan Vong cutting into her skin, the spine-ray inflicting great pain as they charted out her nervous system. Yuuzhan Vong teaching, words, bombarding her during every break. No end in sight.
But then, the illusion was suddenly shattered, and Tahiri woke with a gasp, clutching her chest and head.
"Easy," Alema muttered, keeping her hand on Tahiri's scarred forehead. "Easy."
"Alema?" Tahiri looked up and recoiled slightly at the completely yellow irises, darkened blue skin, and prominent veins, of her Twi'lek friend. "What…?"
"You embrace pain, I embrace the darker emotions of people, hate, anger, lust. They're all the same to me," Alema said with a small shrug. "Instead of fighting the miasma like the rest of you did, I welcomed it. I already sent Vergere, Natua, and Si'ada back to warn Master Skywalker. Don't….don't move. I'm currently the only reason why you're conscious at the moment."
Tahiri stilled her actions, and then realized that she was lying amongst the thousands of decaying corpses that lined the streets leading up to the pyramid. Vines had already started to around her legs and stomach, holding her in place.
"Relax," Alema continued to coach. "Relax."
"What happened?" Tahiri managed, watching as Alema reached out with her other hand to touch the vine wrapping around her stomach. After a second, the vine blackened and died, retreating from Tahiri's still form. Alema repeated the gesture to the vines around Tahiri's legs, before responding.
"Like I said. We all began to walk towards the temple, using the meld to reinforce our strength. Unfortunately, someone else had the strength and will-power of the life-forces of all these dead," Alema motioned to the skeletal and decaying corpses. "Thousands of life-forces, especially ones that are still suffering, will always be stronger than nine. You guys all lost consciousness when the miasma overwhelmed you. Instead of fighting it, like I said, I simply allowed the

miasma to enter my body. I have to say, this type of Force energy really is hell on my complexion."
Tahiri looked for Anakin and the others; vines and other plant life were slowly crawling over them. "Alema!"
"I know," Alema said shortly. "Can you switch over to Vongphase? I think whoever's tapped into this miasma is homing in on us through the power the meld created."
Tahiri nodded once, and instantly, her presence shifted out of the normal spectrum of the Force and into a facsimile of the abscesses in the Force left by the Yuuzhan Vong. Alema very slowly removed her hand. When Tahiri remained conscious, Alema let out a deep breath of relief. "You get Jacen, I'll go wake up Anakin."
"What about the others?" Tahiri said, as she used her lightsaber to cut away the vines wrapping around the older Solo.
"We leave them. Our only hope is to kill whoever's tapping into this miasma before it drains them completely. Without Vongphase, Waxarn and the others will just fall unconscious the moment we let go of them."
"*Do'ro-ik vong pratte!"* A voice echoed from the top of the pyramid. Both Jedi teens stopped their actions and looked up, expecting to see the usual horde of snarling Yuuzhan Vong coming down to challenge them. That wasn't exactly what they saw.
"What the Force?" Alema gaped, wide-eyed and horror-struck.
"Oh Suns!" Tahiri shook her head. "What *are* they?"
"Talk about Sithspawn," Alema breathed, emitting a harsh laugh of disbelief.
The creatures coming down the pyramid were Yuuzhan Vong in one sense…and Kaleesh in another. It was if someone had merged the bodies of the Yuuzhan Vong and Kaleesh on an atomic level. There were Yuuzhan Vong heads on Kaleesh bodies, Kaleesh heads on Yuuzhan Vong torsos. Torsos of one species on the legs of the other, arms and limbs, fingers and toes, a mismatch of both races. They were wielding both amphistaff and traditional Kaleesh weaponry, their forms swaying from side to side almost ghoulishly. Blood, bile, and ichor were dripping out of these bodies and leaving a gory trail along the moss-covered stones of the pyramid. They were undoubtedly dead already, only the Force, and the corrupted will of whoever was controlling them, kept them moving.
"Suns," Tahiri repeated apprehensively, shaking her head in denial.
"Come on!" Alema said, crouching back down next to Anakin. She concentrated hard and yanked Anakin out of the Force-created prison within his mind. "Solo, explanations later, switch to Vongphase now!"

Sensing the urgency, Anakin did as he was told without question. Next to him, Jacen also woke and received similar panicked instructions from Tahiri.
Alema and Tahiri took up a defensive position in front of the two Solos and held up their lightsabers. The blue, orange, and silver beams of energy hissed to life. And then sputtered out before going dead completely. Something or someone had just drained their power cells.
"Well that's not good," Alema said, cursing as the first of the Kaleesh-Vong ghoul-like creatures lunged at her. She delivered pin-point chops to the attacker's neck and felt the tissue collapse. She was about to move on to her next opponent when the same creature grabbed her from behind in a crushing bear-hug. Alema jerked her head back, impacting with the Yuuzhan Vong head of the creature. All that did was give her a headache. She snarled—letting the entropic energy she had absorbed fuel her own abilities. "Die, damn it!"
Alema clenched her fists together and the Kaleesh chest of the creature holding her crumpled like a can in vacuum. It was enough for Alema to wiggle free.
"Catch!" Tahiri called out, tossing over a Kaleesh warblade.
Alema caught it and spun around, decapitating her Vong-headed attacker. The body and head fell to the ground, and the figure was still.
Panting, Alema looked back towards Tahiri to see if she needed help. Tahiri was fine though. The blond Jedi was using the amphistaff she normally had wrapped around her wrist with great effect. She was looping the snake-like weapon around the necks of individuals and pulling hard, creating a guillotine action that likewise removed the transplanted heads from the bodies.
But more continued to come.
Anakin, who by now managed to piece together a basic idea of what had happened, switched out of Vongphase. He staggered a bit as the miasma once again began to surround him, but he utilized the same tactic Alema had. He began to absorb the raw, entropic power, the emotions of the dead, to utilize for himself. He saw Jacen glance at him in shock, and Anakin did his best to smile reassuringly. Though, if Alema's looks were anything to go by, his smile was probably far from reassuring.
He shuddered as the dark energy began to take a hold of him, but he did not fear it. His time training with Alema on the *Home* had taught him to accept all aspects of the Force, all aspects of himself. His acceptance of the Force as one whole enabled him to fully delve into the entropic energies that had crippled everyone else. The Force was a tool, no different than a lightsaber or a blaster, something he could use

as a means to an end. And the end he currently wanted was one where both Alema and Tahiri were still alive and in one piece.
It was a delicate balancing act between baser instincts and cool reason. He was calm, yet understood the urgency of the situation before him and feared what would happen if he did nothing. He could feel the raw power surround him, tempt him. The things he could accomplish if he just let that power control him. The success, the fame. All he had to do was give in to the dark and seductive powers now flowing through his body. He countered those lusts with the love he felt for Tahiri, for Alema, refusing to give in to the temptations the power now at his fingertips afforded him. He was angry, yet his mind reined in that anger.
He channeled the heat from the jungle into the tips of his fingertips, plunging the surrounding area into an arctic freeze. At the same time, he began converting the abundance of dark emotions and entropic energy into another deadly Force attack.
"Tahiri, get back!" Alema yelled in warning, flipping backwards and out of the way.
Tahiri took a startled look at Anakin, and launched herself into the air and behind him.
A split second later, Anakin thrust both his hands out and a powerful and devastating barrage of destruction poured forth. There was a resounding whoosh of air as it was displaced by a heated burst of sheer Force energy. Blue flame—created from the natural heat—and lightning—from the dark energy of the decaying bodies—mixed together in an undulating storm of death. The spiraling sheet of blistering flame, crackling with purple lightning, raked the horde of Kaleesh-Vong like an oncoming train. The ghoulish creatures shrieked as they were vaporized by the destructive energies, vanishing in a flash.
The powerful onslaught of Force energy continued even after the monstrosities were obliterated in its lethal power, heating the stone and vaporizing the nearby plants. It almost looked as if Anakin had lost control, but Jacen swiftly reached out and gripped both of Anakin's forearms. Immediately, the sheet of flame and lightning ceased as Jacen dampened his brother's connection to the Force.
Anakin, breathing heavily, glanced at his hands, reddened and blistered by the heat and power of his own attack. He then looked back at the destruction he had left behind. The bottom stones of the temple were glowing and molten, only ash remained where there had once been several dozen Kaleesh-Vong creatures. The temperature around them was so cold that the Jedi could see their breaths, despite the fact

that it was still mid-day and they were in the middle of a tropical jungle. Even the miasma appeared to have temporarily been abated, used up in the powerful onslaught.
"Thanks Jace," Anakin croaked; exhaling and, with great difficulty, switching back over to Vongphase.
"Yeah." Jacen was unable to believe the extent he had just seen his little brother go.
"Now *that* is why I follow you!" Alema said exuberantly, hugging one of Anakin's arms.
"Are you okay, Anakin?" Jacen said, as Tahiri took his other arm and ran her own diagnostics on him. She obviously didn't trust any verbal response he might have given.
"What's the damage, Jacen?" Anakin motioned to his face.
"Your eyes are still flecked with yellow and you're about as pale and thin as you were when you came back from whatever training you were doing after you left Borleias," Jacen remarked worriedly.
"Stupid, stupid, dummy," Tahiri muttered from his side, shaking her head fiercely. She reached out and gently took his burned hands into hers. She wanted to use the Force to help heal them, but while in Vongphase, such a technique wasn't possible.
Anakin tried to smile, but his strength suddenly left him. He would have collapsed had Alema and Tahiri not been holding him up. "Ow, ow, ow. I guess that's what happens when you embrace your darker emotions."
"Big, very stupid, dummy," Tahiri amended, as she and Alema helped him to lie down.
In the background, Mara, Jysella, Yaqeel, and the rest of Waxarn's knights, along with Si'ada, Vergere, and Natua, stared at the scene in absolute shock. From their expressions, it was clear that they had witnessed Anakin's little pyrotechnic display.
"Anakin!" Mara's shout was full of panic and fear.
"Don't come any closer!" Jacen quickly yelled out in warning. "Unless you can shift into Vongphase, the miasma will..." he trailed off realizing that the miasma was barely a fraction of what it had been. He glanced at his little brother in exasperation before looking back at the others.
"Never mind. Just be careful. There are some extremely powerful dark residuals in this place."
"Anakin," Mara said again in exasperation, once she had joined the group. She knelt by him and took his head between her hands. "Anakin Solo, if you ever scare the ever-living daylights out of me again, so help me I'll make sure your parents ground you for the rest of your life. And I don't care if you're eighteen!"

"I'm okay Mara," Anakin managed, though his voice was hoarse and rough.
Tahiri unscrewed her canteen and gave him some water.
Mara's eyes narrowed, both at Anakin, and at Alema, who was still making no effort to hide the fact that she was in tune with the remaining layer of miasma. "The dark side, Anakin? Really?"
"It's not dark," Anakin said, shaking his head and immediately regretting it. "Ouch. The Force is one whole, it's how it's used that light or dark."
"Indeed," Vergere agreed.
"You, silence," Mara pointed a finger at Vergere. She whirled around on her nephew. "And you, explain. If there is no dark side, what do you call this?" She held Anakin's burnt and blistered hands in front of him. "Or what the Force is doing to her?" She pointed to Alema.
"Hey, I'm just trying out a new fashion statement," Alema remarked defensively, self-consciously examining the dark blue, almost black, skin of her arms. "I can't do Vongphase so this was the only way I can stay conscious. You and the apprentices are lucky, Master Skywalker. Anakin and I absorbed most of the miasma so it should take a heck of a lot longer for you to feel the effects than for us."
"'Lucky'? Lucky!" Mara said low and dangerously. "Anakin…"
"I'm fine, Aunt Mara," Anakin said reassuringly. "Promise. I know what I'm doing and I'm definitely not going dark or will become a Sith any time soon."
"Says the fool who's currently so burned and wasted away from dark side energy that you can't even stand," Mara hissed, projecting nothing but worry. "Force, Anakin, look at yourself! You look like a walking skeleton again! You have more wrinkles than I do! Tell me that there wasn't anything 'dark' about the Force energy you just used."
"We have company," Jacen said, interrupting Mara's fussing.
All heads turned to look up to the top of the pyramid. Emerging from the yorik coral-consumed building were two individuals. They were both Kaleesh, wearing loin cloths and black capes. They also had skulls over their heads, in the Kaleesh tradition, that still looked to have tissue from whatever creature they had belonged to dangling from them. With a morbid jolt, the Jedi realized that the skulls were Yuuzhan Vong.
"You see, now *those* are Sith," Anakin tried to stand, but his legs wouldn't support him.
"Sit," Mara ordered, she then moved up to stand with the others.
"They drained our lightsaber power cells," Alema remarked.

"That doesn't matter," Mara picked up a Kaleesh sword and concentrated, within a second, it was imbued with Force energy. "The Force is our ally."
Alema noted the technique Mara used and examined the Kaleesh sword in her own hands. With a small release of the entropic energy she had collected, the weapon glowed in a sinister way.
"Alema," Mara noted.
"What?" Alema said innocently, as she picked up a second blade and repeated the process. "Maez and Nixa found blood stained with Force energy on one of the weapons. I wondered how it was possible. I guess those two did something like this."
"You made a poisoned blade?" Tahiri said contemplatively.
"Heck of a lot better than a plain old, Force-enhanced one," Alema smiled, twirling the sword about experimentally.
"We'll have a talk later," Mara grumbled. "Natua, Jysella, Yaqeel, those two are examples of what *not* to do. Got it?"
The apprentices were all staring at the destruction Anakin had left behind and Alema's weapon in awe.
Mara closed her eyes, counted to ten, reminded herself that she loved her nephew and didn't want to wring his neck, then exhaled and tried again. "Got it?"
"Yes, Master Skywalker," the three apprentices said dutifully.
"Good, now stay back. If those two are Sith, than they are extremely dangerous."
"'*If* those two are Sith,'" Alema said. "What else *could* they be?"
"Kaleesh Tourism Board Advisors?" Anakin volunteered.
"Quiet!" Tahiri, Mara, and Alema said as one.
"You're supposed to be in a restorative trance, not talking," Mara added.
Jacen kept his gaze on the two figures at the top of the pyramid. "They aren't moving."
"The miasma is," Natua Wan observed.
She was right. The miasma was withdrawing from the jungle and the village and traveling up towards the two individuals. As the miasma disappeared, the Jedi became aware of another group of individuals.
"Behind us!" Jysella cried out in warning.
They cautioned a glanced over their shoulders. A massive band of Kaleesh warriors had gathered, spears, blasters, and swords at the ready.
"Just great," Mara groaned.
"Don't say it," Alema cautioned.
"Could this situation get any worse?"

"I said not to say it," Alema muttered.
One of the figures at the top of the pyramid raised an arm, and more Kaleesh-Vong hybrids slunk out of the cracks in the pyramid's façade. What appeared to be the crew of the Imperial ships that had crashed all around the temple also appeared. They were all twisted from prolonged exposure to dark side energy, their minds gone; mere puppets for the two Sith they flanked. Unlike the Kaleesh-Vong, these people were armed with blaster rifles and heavy weapons.
"It got worse."
"Fear not, Jedi," A female Kaleesh announced from out of the large group of warriors behind them. "I am the reincarnation of Ronderu Iij Kummar, leader of the kolkpravis. We will fight alongside you."
"Hi?" Jacen tried uncertainly. There wasn't exactly any proper procedure on how to respond to such a greeting.
"We have come here to retake our temple from the Dark Ones."
"The pyramid?"
"The Shrupak, our most sacred ancestral temple until it was defiled by the Off-Worlders."
"And the two Dark Ones?" Mara asked.
"Prisoners of a forgotten era, held in stasis and trapped within the bowels of the temple. The Off-Worlders' ship destroyed the Dark Ones' prison and freed them. Legends say that they were too powerful to destroy, so our ancestors locked them away."
"Great, old Sith," Mara said under her breath. "Vergere, you know anything about them?"
The Fosh studied the two figures for a moment, then shook her head. "They were before my time."
"Great! Really old, Sith, then," Alema said brightly.
"We'll welcome your help," Mara responded to the Kaleesh leader. "We'll handle the Dark Ones if you can take care of their soldiers."
"Now that the great web of darkness has been retracted, we will."
"Sith, Yuuzhan Vong, and Imperial all in one day," Jacen said, picking up a spear and imbuing it with the Force. He stood next to Tahiri.
"And the day isn't even over yet," Tahiri said lightly, making her amphistaff rigid.
Above them, the two Sith activated their lightsabers. Two Sith, but three bright red blades emerged. One held a single, longer than usual blade, while the other wielded two blades that were bent at forty-five degree angles. No words were exchanged. They both leaped off the pyramid, the horde behind them charged, and the battle began.
=}III{= =}III{=

After nearly getting sliced to pieces by the Chiss assault squad, and with the wind howling in their ears, Jaina wasn't in the best of moods.
"What was that back there?" Jaina yelled from the driver's seat of the tram.
"What was what?" James replied.
"Don't give me that. You killed with the Force!"
"So? They would have killed us," James said, sounding truly apathetic to the matter. "Would it have been better if I snapped that Chiss' neck with my hands, than with the Force? What does it matter how they die? If I can use the Force as a weapon to save my own life, why shouldn't I?"
"Killing with the Force is the dark side," Jaina gritted out.
"Your problem, not mine," James retorted instantly. "You're the Jedi. I'm just a guy with powers I never wanted. Besides, Jag was down and you were busy playing architect. What was I supposed to do, let them kill Wyn and I?"
Jaina's mouth clamped shut, unable to come up with a retort.
"How is Jag doing?" James looked over to Wyn.
Wyn managed a watery smile. "He's still alive. He's fortunate he was wearing the heavy outdoors coat. It dissipated much of the damage caused by the blaster bolts. He still needs bacta though."
"Is there a reason why Aabe wanted us dead?" Jaina asked aloud. "Or how he had command of those two Chiss combat units?"
"He's probably working for one of the rival families," Wyn said. "What better way to get rid of your enemies than to kill the leadership? We need to get to dad and Chak, they're probably in danger too."
"Where does this tunnel lead?"
Wyn glanced at the wall markings that flashed by. "Oh, it's one of the exit tunnels. It leads to the outside."
"Then we should turn arou…" James trailed off as blaster bolts scored the side of their tram car.
"We have company!" Wyn announced.
"So much for turning around," Jaina swore.
The tunnel promptly began to rise, and they saw the clear blue sky of Csilla.
"I left my coat in the nav-room," Wyn whispered fearfully at the fast-approaching exit. It was below freezing on the surface, and without protection, she'd surely freeze to death in seconds.
Jaina undid her own jacket. "Here."
"What about you?"

"I can use the Force to keep me warn. Anakin's been showing me a little trick, I hope it works." Jaina winked reassuringly at the younger teen. The tram shot out into the open.
More blaster fire.
"They are really getting on my nerves," James said through gritted teeth.
"Can you concentrate on their tram, maybe disable it somehow?"
"I'll just take out the driver," James replied, as if killing was an every-day thing for him.
"Just take out the tram," Jaina hissed. "It'll keep it from following us even if they get a new driver."
"What are those?" Wyn pointed off to the side.
Some type of snow-craft was skimming along the ice.
"Those aren't Chiss?" Jaina said.
"No," Wyn shook her head.
"They're Vagaari ground units," the voice of Chak Fel came over a loudspeaker. *"And they are definitely not supposed to be here."*
The group looked up to see two Clawcrafts hovering above them. The Clawcrafts opened fire on both the pursuing tram and the Vagaari units. Neither stood a chance.
"Chak!" Wyn waved, and one of the Clawcraft waggled its wings in greeting.
"Is Jag alright? The security recordings showed him getting hit."
"He's alive. But he's hurt bad," Wyn yelled up at the Clawcraft. "What's going on?"
"Mass assassination attempt on the Ascendancy leadership. Father's hurt bad as well. The Household Phalanx is guarding him at the moment."
"And you? You're not supposed to be flying!" Wyn shouted.
"Hey, it's the job of the older brother to make sure his younger siblings stay alive. A little discomfort never hurt anyone, and it's not like I'm in a dogfight or anything. Head back to the Nuruodo barracks, my wingman and I will escort you."
"Stupid older brothers," Wyn muttered under her breath, shaking her head at the Clawcraft as she leaned against James for support.
Jaina, in the meanwhile, could only wonder how a simple coordinate-fetching mission turned into something so complicated. And then she remembered what Tahiri had told her before her departure and smiled wanly. She definitely should have known better than to tempt her luck. She was a Solo after all.

Jaina rubbed at her forehead and let out a breath. Time enough to curse her genes later, right now she had to figure out just what she was going to do with herself in the middle of a Chiss civil war.

=}IV{= =}IV{=

Red blades of light cleaved through the air faster than the normal eye could follow as the two Kaleesh Sith landed in the middle of the Kaleesh kolkpravis. The Kaleesh warriors in the Siths' immediate area were sliced apart before they even realized that they were in danger; the smell of burnt flesh rapidly filling the air.

The single-bladed Sith was simply walking through the horde of Kaleesh warriors without a second glance. His Force presence was powerful enough to suck the very life-force from the warriors without even looking. Everywhere he walked, the warriors of the kolkpravis toppled to the ground, completely dead. One brave warrior leaped into the air and hurled his spear at the Sith. The Sith caught the weapon telekinetically, and with a motion of his hands, ripped the warrior in two. Blood and gore sprayed out over the other warriors, and they quickly backed up in fear.

The Kaleesh forces tried to attack the second Sith, but their target snapped his red-eyed, hateful gaze to the charging horde. The first rows let out screams of pain as they toppled to the ground with rapidly advancing, visible burns all over their bodies. Most were dead within seconds. The next rows of warriors could only stare at their companions in shock and horror and were set upon by the dual-saber wielding Sith.

The Sith's lightsaber, however, was intercepted after its first sweep by a Kaleesh blade. Despite the cutting properties of the lightsaber, it couldn't cut through the simple metal weapon. The Kaleesh Sith jerked his head up with a snarl and saw an equally dark visage grinning at him.

"Hi," Alema said with a tilt of her head. She lashed out with her second sword, and the Sith whirled away. The two circled each other as the Kaleesh warriors streamed past to engage the Vong-Kaleesh and corrupted Imperials. "That was a bit cowardly, attacking them. We're the ones you should be worried about."

The Sith snarled beneath his mask as his baleful eyes settled on Alema. Before the attack could build up any potency, however, an amphistaff bit into the Sith's arm with a lightning fast motion. The Sith staggered, having been unable to detect the Yuuzhan Vong weapon or the Jedi currently in Vongphase. He managed to leap into the air to avoid Alema's charge, but not before her augmented Kaleesh blade sliced off the top of one of his lightsabers. The Sith landed a fair

distance away and looked back to see who the second attacker was. Anger flashed, and the dark side coalesced around him like a storm cloud. It was enough to boil away the amphistaff venom before it could do any damage.
"I think you got him angry," Alema remarked to Tahiri as they stood side by side.
"He does know that since the miasma is gone, there are more Jedi than just the two of us?" Tahiri said casually.
"Oh I'm sure he'll figure it out any second now," Alema said with a grin.
The Sith made a step to re-engage the two female Jedi, when two walls of Force energy closed in on him and knocked the wind out of him. Like being hit by a boxer's punch, the walls of Force energy continued to slam into him from different sides, knocking him around like an out-of-control snubfighter. Staggering, the Sith barely fended off the lightsaber attacks from three of Waxarn Kel's Knights as the Jedi closed in to finish the job.
The three attacking Jedi grinned at each other. To them, it was clear the century or so of stasis hadn't been kind to him. Even with all the entropic energy and power from the temple's Force nexus that he had absorbed, the Sith was still no match for them.
"Frang," Alema said suddenly, biting her lower lip as she watched the fight.
"Alema?"
"Waxarn's people are going to get themselves killed." Alema hefted her Kaleesh blades and began to run towards the fight.
"What?" Tahiri said, running alongside her.
"He's gradually changing his Force presence. Soon they won't be able to see him anymore even if he's right in front of him. Believe me, it's something I've been practicing with to let me sneak around better."
Alema dove in just as the victorious looks on the Waxarn Kel's Jedi began to turn to confusion. The Twi'lek swore as the Sith's lightsaber branded her mid-section. She had prevented one of Waxarn's Knights from receiving a fatal blow, but the burn still hurt like anything. Alema used the pain and anger to emit a blast of Force energy that lifted Waxarn's people off their feet and threw them to safety.
The Sith looked up, obviously surprised that his attack had been nullified.
"Yes, I can still see you," Alema's yellow eyes glimmered with rage. "You're not *that* good at sneaking around. I know someone better."
The Sith growled and lashed out with his saber. Alema blocked the attack and took a step back to put some room between them.
"Tahiri, can you still see him?" Alema called out.

Wide-eyed, Tahiri stared at the spot where the Sith had been only moments earlier. "No!"
"Of course you can't," Alema groaned under her breath. "Never mind then. Go help Skywalker and the other Solo. I've got this!"
"Are you sure?"
"You can't fight what you can't see, now go help the others!" Alema yelled. The Sith re-engaged her, and the Twi'lek was forced onto the defensive.
A second later, though, cloud of dirt was thrown into the air by a blast of Force-created wind. Before the dirt settled completely, Tahiri was in a running attack that tackled the startled Sith. Tahiri flipped off her prey as the Sith slashed at her with his lightsaber, but she had accomplished her mission. Her amphistaff was impaled in one side of the Sith's chest, just under his armpit, and the amphistaff's head was coming out the other.
"I thought you couldn't see him," Alema remarked dryly.
"You were fighting *someone*," Tahiri shrugged. "I just used the dirt to make sure you hadn't actually gone crazy for good. I then, well, estimated."
Both teens were lifted off their feet by a wave of rage and hatred, slamming into a wall of crumbling stone that had once belonged to a house. Amazingly, though skewered through and through by Tahiri's amphistaff, the Sith was still alive. Alive and very unhappy. The dark side storm cloud had only intensified.
Alema got up and inhaled deeply. She threw aside her blades and cracked her knuckles. "Fine. You want to play it like that? I can dance. Tahiri, I'm going to need some of your strength."
The blond Jedi blinked and nodded cautiously. "Alema?"
"He's using his hate alone to keep himself alive."
"Yes, and…?"
"If the hate's gone, he's dead." Alema began walking towards the Sith.
"And you need my strength, why?"
"That hate has to go somewhere," Alema looked over her shoulder at Tahiri and winked. "Don't worry about me."
The Sith thrust out his hand and a stream of Sith Lightning crackled out towards the approaching Twi'lek.
"Alema!" Tahiri screamed, scrambling back to her feet to assist. But she stopped half-way when she realized that the lightning wasn't having the Sith's desired effect on the Twi'lek.
Instead, Alema had her own hands extended and appeared to be absorbing the lightning into the palms of her hands. "Go on," Alema said softly over the violent crackle of electricity, still approaching the

Sith step by step. "Use it all. All your hate, your anger. Use it on me. I know what it's like to hate so much that it consumes you. I know what's it's like to be so angry at something that it's all you can think about. I *understand* why you feel as you do."
That only seemed to enrage the Sith even more, and he intensified the lightning. The smell of ozone filled the air, and even Alema seemed to wince a bit, but the Twi'lek continued her steady pace.
"Alema," Tahiri whispered.
Going to need your help now, Vong-girl. This is one <u>mad</u> Sith. Alema's thoughts filtered through to Tahiri.
Tahiri swallowed and focused on sharing her strength with the Twi'lek. Alema's legs became steadier at the reinforcement and the intense lightning barrage appeared to decrease.
The Sith began to gasp, trying to pull his hands away, but at the same time he was unable to lower them or stop his attack. Alema had entered his mind and was forcing him to continue, to expel all of the negative emotions that had originally twisted and warped him in the first place. She finished her trek to him and gently gripped his wrists.
"It's okay. You can stop now," Alema said, her yellow eyes meeting pained red. "You can rest now. A part of your feelings will always remain with me. You will not be forgotten."
The Sith let out a rasping breath as the damage caused by the amphistaff in him finally caught up to him. He blinked weakly at Alema and struggled to remove the skull covering his head. Alema reached up to help him. A silent conversation occurred between them, and Alema smiled understandingly and nodded. "They'll forgive you."
That seemed to be all the Sith needed as he let out one last ragged breath before his body sagged in Alema's arms and then faded away with the Force.
Alema swayed for a moment and toppled over, caught by Tahiri before she hit the ground. Tahiri felt Alema's Force presence overwhelm her own for a fraction of a very long second, during which Tahiri had a glimpse of everything Alema had experienced while being bombarded by the Sith Lightning; unimaginable levels of anger, of guilt, of despair, of hate. A desire to be both powerful, but also to make the sacrifices that had occurred worth it. Tahiri blinked, and Alema's Force presence had returned to normal. Completely normal. She still had that dark edge to her, but the miasma she had absorbed had completely dissipated.
"Sorry about that," Alema muttered, her eyes still closed. "Needed a link back to the good feelings. Your bond with Anakin is kind of my anchor."

"What did you do?" Tahiri whispered, reaching out to grip one of Alema's hands.
"Something very stupid," Alema coughed. "Really should stop taking lessons from Hero Boy over there."
"Tell me something I don't know," Tahiri remarked.
Alema laughed weakly. "The Sith's hate was all that was keeping him going. Kind of like what I had been like before you and Anakin got to me. Didn't have time for that drawn out an intervention so I pulled all that hate out of him through the lightning he was throwing at me. And I thought I had been angry at the Yuuzhan Vong…that guy pretty much had a grudge against anyone living."
"Just what *am* I going to do with you and Anakin," Tahiri sighed, placing a hand on Alema's forehead and tapping into the emotional maelstrom the Twi'lek had absorbed.
"Tahiri, no…"Alema tried to struggle.
"Friends help each other out," Tahiri said in a deciding tone.
Alema abandoned her weak protests and relaxed as Tahiri opened up their bond of friendship to its fullest extent. The blond Jedi stiffened as she felt the first tendrils of the Sith's dark emotions. After a second though, Tahiri discovered that these feelings weren't all that different than what Lord Nyax used or what she had felt when she thought Anakin had died. Just as Alema's own experiences allowed her to empathize and deal with the emotions of the Sith, so too did Tahiri's own emotions.
"Friends." Alema's smile was peaceful and genuine for once as let herself rest against Tahiri's kneeling form. Through their bond, and her bond with Anakin, Alema used their supportive feelings and entered a light trance to undo the damage all the negative and entropic energies had inflicted on her body. "Friends are nice. That Sith never had any."
"You think people go dark because they're alone?" Tahiri said contemplatively, as she absently reflected on her own experiences.
"Alone, left alone," Alema gestured absently. "It's nice to know that at least someone cares every once in a while. Otherwise, what's the point of fighting for them?"
=}V{= =}V{=
"All the intrigue, destabilization and disappearances, they've all led to this moment," Chak said grimly, motioning to the display panel. It showed an all-out battle unfolding above Csilla, with Chiss vessels firing on one and other and Vagaari ships darting in and out. Chak, Jag, James, Jaina, and Wyn were in a secure room within the Fel Estate, accessible only by a biometrically locked lift and an emergency escape chute. In the background, Soontir Fel floated in a private bacta tank,

burns caused by his assassin still healing. Though Jaina, Chak, and Jag had wanted to help out, they had been ordered by Chiss High Command to remain in hiding for the duration of the battle. As much as they disliked it, an order was an order.
"The battle is a stalemate," Jag noted, a bacta patch covering his torso.
"The exiled families and their sympathizers know the Ascendancy's every tactic and doctrine," Chak nodded. "And the wave of assassination attempts managed to kill several of the Ascendancy's most skilled leaders."
"If the battle continues, it doesn't matter who wins," Wyn said almost fearfully. "The Yuuzhan Vong will be able to just walk right in and take out any of the survivors."
"I think that was their eventual goal," Jaina said grimly. "We have to do something to end the fighting as quick and as decisively as possible."
"But what?" Chak said. "I can't fly in a space battle, Jag's hurt, and our father's unconscious. We may have the favor of the Ascendancy, but it was our father who carried the weight of authority, not his children."
"Then step up and show the Ascendancy that *all* the Fels are worthy of their respect," Jaina said. "Jag, Wyn, are you in?"
"I am," Jag quirked an eyebrow, curious as to what she had planned.
"Me too," Wyn said eagerly.
Chak glanced warily at his little sister, but nodded as well.
"Wyn, we need you to stay down here and keep an eye on all of the planetary sensors. There is a small likelihood that the Vong are already out there and just waiting for the battle to boil down. In addition, we're going to need you to use this room's communications equipment to help coordinate with the rest of the Ascendancy," Jaina said.
"Will do. James can keep me company."
"I assume the Ascendancy is holding some ships in reserve?" Jaina said as she, Jag and Chak took the lift back up to the living quarters
"A couple of fighter squadrons," Chak nodded. They hastily gathered into the tram that led to the hangar. "But it shouldn't be more than a force-worth. It's standard procedure to empty the hangar bays if Csilla ever comes under direct attack."
They arrived at their destination and Jaina waved a hand over the door control. "Something's better than no…"
Blasterfire cut her off the moment door to the Nuruodo hangar bay whooshed open. Jag and Chak dove behind several crates while Jaina used her lightsaber to deflect several more bolts. A number of Vagaari ground vehicles had parked themselves in front of the hangar, and Vagaari ground troopers were pouring fire onto the startled members of the Nuruodo household phalanx. One of the ground vehicles was

equipped with a heavy cannon that had already rendered several parked Clawcraft inoperable.
"Colonels!" Shawnkyr yelled out, her back against a load-lifter.
"Shawnkyr, status?" Jag ordered. "Why isn't force Spike in orbit helping to defend Csilla?"
"We got orders grounding us until we're needed!" Shawnkyr replied. "Straight from High Command. Without your father commanding us, no one else has contradicted that order."
"Why don't the rest of the base know about this attack?" Chak yelled, accurately picking off one of the gunners in the vehicle with the heavy cannon.
"Must be one of the sympathizers in the control room, we sent word an hour ago!" Shawnkyr peered through the cockpit of the loadlifter to fire off several shots. "We're pinned down at the moment and can't get to our fighters. Any longer and we won't have any fighters to get to!"
Another Clawcraft exploded.
"Jaina, I've been monitoring the security feed, the people in the control room are dead! There are four Chiss inside, but they're directing one of the exiled-family's landing ships towards your location."
"Thanks Wyn," Jaina cursed. "We're going to have more company shortly!"
A Vagaari grenade tumbled through the air amidst the hail of blasterfire, and landed unnoticed behind Jag. While Jag tried to coordinate a counter attack, Chak took note of the explosive and frantically dove on top of it. Jag spun around at his older brother's actions, eyes widening as the shockwave of the grenade took him off his feet.
"Jag! Chak!" Jaina yelled.
"Colonel!" Shawnkyr cried out. Both she and Jaina recklessly abandoned their cover to reach the two Fels, catching the Vagaari off guard.
Jag was already coming too, only winded by the blast. Chak, however, lay lifeless on the ground, blood pooling around him.
"Chak," Jag murmured, completely stunned.
Another Clawcraft exploded, and this shook the shocked trio back to their senses. Jag seemed to draw a new air of determination around him, and pushed aside his grief for the duty he had at hand.
"Shawnkyr, Jaina and I will cover you. Get to your fighter and clear a path for the rest of us."
"Yes, sir."
Jag looked to Jaina, and she nodded. "Go!"

Shawnkyr sprinted through the myriad of lasers and projectiles being fired through the hangar, with Jaina running stride by stride acting as her shield. Jag focused his own blaster on those carrying heavy weapons, leaving the two women to deal with the storm of blasterfire raging around them.
Shawnkyr reached her fighter and allowed the lift to pull her into the cockpit.
Jaina quickly leaped clear as the Clawcraft's thrusters flared and its defenses came online. The Vagaari vehicles sitting in the hangar opening never had a chance. Green bolts of light screeched from Shawnkyr's Clawcraft and the blaster-cannon on the back of one of the ground vehicles disappeared in a ball of flame. Shawnkyr continued to strafe the opening, and the Vagaari lost all means of victory.
"Force Spike, get to your ships!" Jag barked, pulling off his bacta patch and grabbing a flightsuit from the wall supply closet. "If your fighter was destroyed, work with base security and Wynssa Fel to apprehend the traitors within the control room!"
Jaina made her way back to Jag. "Can you fly with those injuries?"
"I have a duty to do. These injuries are nothing," Jag said, gripping a pilot's helmet. He used the helmet's comlink. "Shawnkyr, take off with whoever else is ready and keep that troop transport from landing."
"Affirmative, force Spike Leader."
"Wyn, see if you can find out if the other fighter hangars on the planet had been keeping ships in reserve. Intentionally or not. If you find any extra ships, send them our way."
"On it, Jag. Looking for other ships and traitors now. Oh, and Cem's joined me and James. He says hi to you and Chak."
Jag felt an invisible hand squeeze his stomach. "Chak is dead."
Silence came over the comm-line.
"Let me know if you find any other ships, force Spike Leader out."
"Jag," Jaina said softly. Despite his cold exterior, she could feel a blaze of anguish burning on the inside.
"We have a job to do, Jaina. Let's stop this civil war and return to Galactic Alliance space with the information Wyn found."
Jaina headed to her X-wing, parked in the back of the hangar. She cast one last look in Jag's direction, before sliding into her cockpit and readying herself for yet another space battle.
=}VI{= =}VI{=
Though the battle with one of the Kaleesh Sith was over, the single-bladed Sith was proving a much more difficult challenge. Already two of Waxarn's Knights were down and out of the fight, and the Sith showed no signs of slowing down.

"This guy's not going down," Mara panted, readjusting her sweaty grip on her saber.
Jacen grimly rose from checking on one of Waxarn's Knights. "We are though."
"Si'ada, think you can wake Waxarn and the others? We might need their help," Mara asked the remaining conscious Death Knight.
"Can the two of you handle the Sith by yourself?" The human Jedi asked, her skin glistening with sweat.
"We'll manage," Mara said, inclining her head towards her nephew. "He's not even at Palpatine's or Vader's level, just knows a few fancy tricks."
"Like reanimating the dead and merging bodies," Jacen remarked sarcastically. Their Kaleesh allies were still in a battle of a lifetime, and obviously enjoying every second of it. They far outnumbered the ghoulish creatures created by the two Sith, and the Kaleesh-Vong-corrupt-Imperial force was down to its last few members. The hacked apart remains of the other mindless slaves were left in the wake of the advancing Kaleesh kolkpravis warriors.
At the perimeter of the village, Vergere was with the three apprentices. Yaqeel, Natua, and Jysella were all completely stunned by the esoteric and powerful demonstrations of different Force abilities, but also frightened as well. This was truly a Jedi battle on a level they had only heard of in the stories told by Tionne.
Jacen and Mara approached the single-sabered Sith from opposite sides. The Sith made a motion, and fallen Kaleesh blades sliced through the air like missiles. Mara avoided the weapons. Jacen wrested control of them from the Sith and let them fall harmlessly to the ground.
Recognizing a greater threat, as well as sensing the powerful well of Force energy within Jacen, the Sith turned his full attention onto the male Jedi.
"He's going to use his telekinesis again," Anakin commented from within the collapsed ruins of a nearby house.
"I know," Jacen replied, once again taking control of the flying weapons from the Sith.
"Life drain next," Anakin added.
"I know!" Jacen used his own Force energies to disrupt the powerful draining technique that the Sith had used to kill all those Kaleesh previously. "Aren't you supposed to be healing?"
"He's enhancing his body with rage."
"Look, do you want to fight him?" Jacen said incredulously, letting Mara step in to throw the Sith off balance.

"Still healing." Anakin made a sad face. "Alema and Tahiri would kill me if I said yes."
"Thank the Force for them," Jacen muttered, leaping in to relieve Mara.
Mara traded places, standing in front of the ruins. She was breathing heavily as she changed weapons to one of the many Kaleesh spears lying discarded on the ground. "Any advice?"
"Since Tahiri and Alema beat the other guy fairly easily. This guy's probably the Sith Master," Anakin commented. "Let him beat himself."
"You're too young to start speaking like a Jedi Master," Mara glowered.
"Jacen's got the right idea," Anakin gestured.
Jacen had changed his technique, going from offensive, to a purely defensive lightsaber stance. The Sith's red saber hammered the Force-imbued Kaleesh blade in his hand again and again, but Jacen parried each and every attack. The Sith leaped back and tried to use the Force to crush Jacen's organs, but Jacen used the Force to keep them from failing under the Sith's attack.
"All he's doing is defending," Mara noted. "The Sith will wear us out if that's all we do."
"Keep watching," Anakin said, sensing his brother's thoughts and agreeing with his course of action.
The Kaleesh Sith appeared to grow infuriated that none of his attacks, lightsaber or otherwise, were working, and began to use even more powerful Force attacks against Jacen. Yet, Jacen countered each and every one, his face a mask of concentration.
"The apprentices," Anakin said quickly, realizing that the Sith was trying for a softer target.
Mara hurled herself into the air and placed herself between the Sith and Yaqeel, Jysella, and Natua, just in time. The bombardment of fear and hate hit Mara full on, but the Jedi Master had been prepared for it and shrugged it off by immersing herself in positive thoughts. She then advanced on the Sith, mimicking Jacen's passive offensive, once again giving him two targets to worry about.
While the Sith was fully focused on the two Jedi, Anakin quickly came up with an idea. Jacen and Mara couldn't win on a defensive battle, Mara was right about that. But keeping the Sith frustrated and focused on them caused the Sith to ignore everything else around him.
Natua, Anakin sent through the Force. He saw the Falleen apprentice jerk in surprise and look towards him. *Lightsaber?*
Natua nodded slowly and motioned to where it was clipped to her belt.
Power cell?
Natua shook her head.
Use Yaqeel's

Natua leaned over to Yaqeel and whispered hastily. The Bothan apprentice had been with Mara when the two Sith had drained the power cells of the lightsabers of the first group. Though Mara wasn't using her lightsaber—since it would most likely be drained the moment she activated it—the apprentices were hardly the most dangerous of targets. Sith enjoyed being all powerful, and a mere fifteen year old apprentice probably wouldn't scare or worry them at all. Yaqeel unscrewed her lightsaber and handed over its power cell. Natua replaced the one in her saber, and then awaited more instructions.
Yaqeel. The Bothan likewise gazed in Anakin's direction.
Rocks on my go.
Anakin made a falling motion with his hand, then pointed to several boulders on the bluff overlooking the village. Despite the distance, Yaqeel saw both his motion and the rocks, and nodded to show she understood.
Jysella. The youngest member of the group straightened, determined not to disappoint Anakin.
Anakin smiled at those thoughts and sent a wave of positive reinforcement. *Sith brain, scramble. Just need to distract him for a few seconds.*
Jysella's eyes bulged in their sockets and she glanced fearfully at the skull-wearing dark-sider.
You can do it. You're a Horn. I'll even give you a little boost.
Jysella visibly swallowed, but also nodded.
Natua, on my go, activate your lightsaber, do that Falleen pheromone thing, and pretend to advance. Get the Sith's attention.
The Falleen appeared nervous, yet she too agreed to his orders.
And myself? Vergere asked.
Anakin was started by this, but had a role in mind. *Keep doing what you're doing and keep the three of them safe if the Sith does something unexpected.*
As you command. Anakin wasn't sure if she was mocking him or not.
Thank you, Vergere.
Anakin made eye contact with Jacen. His brother was tiring and already sported a burn on his shoulder. The Sith was working himself into a fit against the passive offense of both Jedi, running on sheer adrenaline and whatever else he could get from the temple's Force nexus.
I have a plan.
Quick. Can't hold him off much longer. He's tapped into the Force nexus in the temple.
Anakin refocused back onto the apprentices. He gently nudged Jysella's mind, and she opened up a tentative Force bond. Careful, as to not

overwhelm her with Force energy, he began to transfer a slow trickle of strength to her. Even though it was a small amount, Jysella shuddered, and then looked to him with awe. Anakin had guessed right. Like her father and brother, Jysella was capable of absorbing energy from elsewhere and using it for herself.
Anakin winked at her, then tapped into both Yaqeel's and Natua's minds to signal the start of his plan.
Several things happened in quick succession.
The sound of Natua's lightsaber activating was amplified by Anakin so that its snap-hiss resounded ominously through the canyon.
The Sith was alone. The Kaleesh kolkpravis had emerged victorious and were now watching the battle with great interest.
The amplified lightsaber noise definitely caught the Sith's attention, and under the influence of Jysella's mind trick, he saw an even greater threat. In the Sith's mind, Natua suddenly appeared to be a fully grown Falleen Jedi Master, pulsating with power and wisdom. Her pheromones ensured that she had his complete attention and was completely irresistible in his eyes. So preoccupied with this new threat, and that of Jacen and Mara, he was unaware of a more immediate danger. Though he quickly managed to shake off the apprentice-level illusion, the seconds it brought were more than enough for Yaqeel to levitate the giant boulders from the cliff up and over the Sith. Gravity did the rest. By the time the Sith realized that Natua was just a teenage apprentice with shaking legs, the boulders were already compacting his body into a bloody smear.
A distraught wail echoed through the Force as a backlash of negative Force energy erupted from the squashed Sith Lord. The wave of energy spiraled out into the air for a fraction of a second, a storm of anger and outrage, before it dissipated—the Sith's soul returning to the Force.
In the absolute silence that followed, Anakin smiled at the apprentices.
Great job.
The three let their wobbly legs finally give out as they sat on the ground in shock in exhaustion.
Great job. Anakin repeated, feeling the amazement give way to a sense pride and accomplishment. He smirked. They definitely deserved it.
=}VII{= =}VII{=
"Moff Flennic has always been a stickler for protocol and tradition," Imperial liaison officer, Commander Garith Green said over a sip of wine. The fireplace was roaring, keeping the guest suite warm and lit. "But he's also been craftier than many give him credit for."

"He'd have to be," Leia agreed. "He's survived the fall of the Emperor, the fighting warlords, and countless internal struggles within the Empire, and came out in control of the Empire's primary shipyards."
"Exactly," Garith said. "Which is why I have a feeling there's more going on than he wants to reveal. You said it earlier, Ambassador Solo, an alliance with the Vong, even if it's a simple non-aggression treaty, is bad in the long run. Kurlen hasn't gotten to where he is by being short sighted."
"It might have something to do with those Vong ships hanging about," Han commented darkly. "What's Flennic going to say, 'I'm sorry, I can't accept your treaty, please go away?'"
"Wait," Valin spoke up. "I'm confused. Is Flennic a bad guy or not?"
"Things are hardly that simple, Horn," Kyp spoke up, his arms crossed in from him as he reclined in comfy chair. "Most of the time, people are just scared and willing to do anything to survive."
"Most of the times?"
"The ones that are brave enough, or stupid enough, to act against impossible odds before a Jedi gets there are normally dead already," one of the Jedi under Kyp remarked sarcastically.
"Darrad," Kyp said in subtle rebuke.
"Sorry, Master Durron, but it's the truth. Jedi only go to rescue people in trouble, not people who are already dead. You don't see us trying to retake Tholatin or Gyndine. That Solo kid said it earlier. We're not commandos or diplomats, but something in between."
"Getting back on topic," Leia said. "Will telling Moff Flennic about Moff Rosset matter if he is being coerced into agreeing to the non-aggression pact."
"And what if Moff Rosset is in the same situation?" Danni Quee said.
"We won't know until we actually talk with either of them. Hopefully Luke's having an easier time than we are," Han shrugged.
"It'll be hard to get Moff Flennic alone. Sub-Commander Torkal Vorrik has been around whenever we've tried," Leia said.
"We could just tell the both of them what we know and see how Torkal reacts," Kyp opined.
"If *that* doesn't blow up in our faces, I don't know what will," Han said sardonically.
"Why don't you stay with the *Falcon* just in case we have to make a quick escape," Leia patted his arm. "Diplomacy was never your strong suit anyways."
"I ruin one lousy meal…" Han muttered in mock disgust.
"Valin, Seff, and Barv can keep you company," Kyp said.
"Hey!" Valin protested.

"Your dad promised to do some very inventive things to me, stuff he learned from his time at Cor-Sec, if I ever let anything happen to you," Kyp said. "You don't want your favorite Jedi Master to suffer an embarrassingly humiliating death, do you?"
"No. We wouldn't want anything to happen to Master Skywalker," Valin said with a solemn nod.
"Brat," Kyp scowled. "But seriously kid. You get hurt, Durron learns to see how long he can hold his breath in the vacuum of space."
"You can take one of the *Falcon's* guns," Han bribed, having raised two teenage boys himself. "Barv, you can have the other. Seff can take the co-pilot's seat. I'm no Jedi, but I definitely see a lot of running and shooting in the near future. Mostly us running. And the bad-guys shooting."
"Fine," Valin agreed.
"Great, then we can break the news to Flennic at breakfast and hope everything goes to hell," Kyp smiled. "I like it."
"Of course you would."
Command Green looked puzzled at their risky plan. "And how exactly did you Rebels destroy two Death Stars and the Empire again?"
"Luck," Han said.
"Lots and lots of it," Leia added.
"And we didn't have one central place shaped like a giant target that had all the hopes and dreams of an Empire crammed into it. Nor did we make a second one when the first one went boom," Kyp said with a friendly smile. "Saved a lot of credits by doing that."
"Grand Admiral Pellaeon told me that being your liaison would be an unforgettable experience."
"And has it been?"
"Unfortunately."
"At least we lived up to his expectations," Han raised his wine glass. Garith chuckled and raised his own glass in salute. "May you continue to do so."
=}VIII{= =}VIII{=
Doran Sarkin Tainer staggered backwards from the impact of a brutal punch to his jaw. The blow had him sway dangerously close to the edge of the platform he was on. Another blow knocked the wind out of him.
"*Shabuir!"* The Mandalorian in full armor drove another metal-gauntleted fist into Doran's mid-section. "I spent my entire life working my way up to *Mand'alor*'s side! I will not have my fate decided by some pretty-boy whelp of a Jedi!"

Doran tried to block the next attack, but the dart embedded in his neck had already injected the powerful paralyzing toxin and made his movements slow and clumsy. An upper-cut clacked his teeth together and caused the world to spin as his legs gave out. As the Mandalorian gripped him by his shirt, Doran vaguely tried to recall how he wound up in his current situation on the first place.
Since coming to Raxis Prime nearly two weeks ago, Mandalore, also known as Boba Fett, had used him as a measuring stick for the Supercommandos-in-training. Though the potential soldiers had spent much of their time against training droids and the harsh atmosphere of Raxis Prime, they had had few challenges worthy of them. Doran, however, proved to be a very harsh measuring stick and over a dozen potential Supercommandos were sent home in that week and a half stretch. Of course, the alternative for those commandos could have been death.
Which, in hind sight, would have averted this current confrontation.
Doran tried to remove the Mandalorian's hand from around his neck, but couldn't summon the strength. "You're not so tough, are you, boy? All I have to do is squeeze a little bit harder and I'll break your neck."
Just as Doran's vision began to darken, a blaster whined, and the Mandalorian pitched forward with a hole in the back of his helmet. Doran collapsed back to the platform, weakly gripping his neck as he struggled to take in air. It was extremely difficult considering the paralyzing agent had reached his lungs.
"Easy." Jintar knelt at Doran's side. He pulled out the dart, recognized the toxin, and injected him with the counter-agent. Within seconds, Doran could breathe again, gasping great big lungfuls of air.
"Ouch."
"Yeah, you've got a bit of a cut," Jintar motioned, pulling out his aid kit.
Doran tilted his head and saw his reflection off a discarded piece of metal. "I'd hate to see your definition of a serious cut then." The said cut had been created by his Mandalorian attacker's gauntlet, which had ripped a gash that ran the length of his cheek.
"What is it with you and your complaining? You're still alive," Jintar slugged him in the arm after he placed the bandage on Doran's cheek.
"I take it that guy didn't appreciate his ticket home?" Doran managed, working his jaw and wincing. He could already feel both his mother and Sannah's alarm and he quickly sought to assuage their fears. He hadn't seen either since he started helping Boba Fett weed out the weaker prospects. Sannah was still training with Dinua, and his mother was helping to plan the eventual attack on the Yuuzhan Vong fleet at

Bandomeer. He would normally be missing both, but he had been kept both busy and exhausted by the non-stop exercises.
"No," Jintar moved to the body and began examining the Mandalorian's equipment. "Let's see which clan this worthless piece of trash is from."
Still lying prone on the platform, Doran saw a tattoo on the dead Mandalorian's neck, just below where Jintar had shot him. The tattoo looked a lot like the insignia of the old Rebel Alliance, but with a bite taken out of the bottom. "That important?" He pointed to the tattoo
Jintar hauled the body over and glanced to where Doran was indicating. The second he saw the mark, he cursed. "*Kyr'tsad!*"
"*Kyr'tsad?*"
Instead of answering, Jintar quickly reached for his helmet and activated his comlink. "This is Jintar, lock down the area and protect the *Mand'alor*. Brothers from *Kyr'tsad* have infiltrated our ranks. I repeat, Death Watch is here on Raxis Prime."
=}IX{= =}IX{=
The Kaleesh kolkpravis, the 'official' fighting force of the Kaleesh people, were in the process of gathering their dead for a mass funeral ceremony. Their leader, a self-proclaimed reincarnation of one of their most revered leaders, Ronderu Iij Kummar; prevented anyone from going into the temple in the meantime.
Which was a problem since it was still the epicenter for a dark-side tainted Force nexus. Though it wasn't nearly as strong on the one on Coruscant, or even elsewhere in the galaxy, it was still a fount of power.
"We respect your traditions. But you must understand that as long as that nexus remains uncapped, it will continue to spill out its taint not only into the village, but into the very fabric of this planet as a whole," Mara patiently spoke with the kolkpravis leader. "Over time, this planet will become just as corrupted as the grounds of this village."
The self-proclaimed reincarnation of a Kaleesh war-hero just so happened to be Force-sensitive; so mind-tricks were out of the question. Yet it was fortunate she could feel the Force. It was how the leader managed to keep almost all of her people from foolishly rushing the temple when the miasma had been at its strongest. She hadn't managed to stop all of them though, as evident from the thousands of plant-covered bodies that covered the village floor.
From her, the Jedi had learned that the Yuuzhan Vong ship and one of the Imperial vessels had gotten into a fight in orbit above the planet. The Yuuzhan Vong ship had been shot down and crashed into the temple, destroying the stasis fields that had held the two Sith in place. When the Imperials landed to look for any Vong survivors, the Sith had

corrupted them and had them call for help. Which explained the two other crashed Imperial vessels nearby. After that, the Sith had laid siege to the surrounding village and massacred the warriors that had tried to stop them.
"Please see it my way, Master Jedi. My people know nothing of your Force. They have heard of the Jedi, sure, but hearing and recognizing a name is not the same as understanding the weight it holds. I claim that my powers come from Ronderu Iij Kummar, our most revered leader. They are satisfied with that explanation. Talk of a Force-nexus, or dark-side corruption means nothing to most of them. The great many will see the taint as a way of our ancestors expressing their anger at us. The Shrupak is our most sacred temple, and we cannot allow anymore off-worlders inside. Especially not after the ones that came before you, since they were the ones who started all this in the first place."
"Just take three or four of us in, it will not take more than that to plug up the well. They can even help end the growth of the coral consuming your temple," Mara reasoned. "You can say that we are helping to purify the corruption brought by the other off-worlders, and that as off-worlders, we best know how to handle the corruption."
The Kaleesh war-leader pursed her lips beneath the skull she wore, then nodded slowly. "Very well, but I will insist that at least one of those entering the Shrupak is one of the child-Jedi." She motioned to Jysella, Natua, and Yaqeel. "The presence of a child should help reassure the others that you are entering the Shrupak for peaceful reasons."
"Will there be any dangers in the temple?"
"Just wild animals that make their way in."
"Then Natua will be the one who enters." Mara said, choosing the oldest apprentice once more.
"And, you must stay out here. For the same reason as this Natua must enter." The leader stipulated.
"That is fine as well." Mara motioned to Jacen. "Will he be allowed in?"
"He will."
"Waxarn," Mara called out and gestured to the now conscious Knight.
"Master Skywalker?" Waxarn approached.
"Pick one of your people. You'll be working together with Jacen and Natua to close up the well of Force energy. I won't be entering for diplomatic reasons."
"The Falleen apprentice?"
"The Kaleesh do not let just anyone into their sacred temple. They felt that a younger Jedi would not defile the temple as much as an older one would."

Waxarn nodded in understanding. "Then I will have Si'ada come with us. She is younger than Natua."
The Kaleesh leader bowed her head gratefully. "Thank you, young Jedi."
"It's your planet, your rules," Waxarn remarked, returning the bow.
While Mara went off to inform Natua and Jacen about their mission, Waxarn called out to the youngest member of his group. "Si'ada."
The teen looked up from where she had been fiddling with the straps of her red flight suit. "Waxarn?"
"We're entering the temple with Jacen and Natua." Waxarn jerked a thumb in the other two's direction.
"Wizard," she grinned, hopping off the rock she was sitting on.
Jacen, Natua, and the Keleesh leader joined them.
"I will lead you to the passageways that lead to the inner sanctum," the leader said. "But my religion prevents me from going any further than that without the blessings of a priest. Since they all died when the off-worlders came, I do not wish to tempt the wrath of my ancestors by disturbing their resting place."
"We will try to be as respectful of the inner chambers as we can," Jacen said politely.
"A word of warning. Wild mumuu live inside, they are the temple's natural guardians."
"What's a 'mumuu'?" Si'ada asked
"A tusked beast native to our planet. They are used both for sport and ritual purposes. But warriors such as yourself should have no trouble with them."
Si'ada smiled. "Right. It'd be rather embarrassing for us Jedi if we got dragged off by wild animals and eaten. Wouldn't it, Natua?"
"It would," Natua inclined her head in agreement as they began ascending the stairs to the top of the pyramid.
"Don't underestimate the intelligence of wild animals," Jacen cautioned the younger two.
"That's right," Waxarn said. "If you're their prey, there's no telling what tricks they'll use."
"And if they were exposed to the tainted Force energy, they might have been twisted beyond what their usual instincts would have them do."
"Don't worry, we'll stick to you two," Si'ada said perkily. Obviously still riding high on the adrenaline of the previous fight. "After what you guys just faced, I don't think there's *anything* you can't handle."
=}X{= =}X{=

"*Force Spike, you do not have clearance to take off, return to your hangar immediately. I repeat..."*
Jaina turned the comm-channel off, having no desire to listen to the compromised control tower's instructions. She knew that Jag had already switched the tower off, she continued to feel the roiling emotions he was clamping down on as their three-squadron group screamed towards the main battle.
They were not the only ones. Wyn, Cem, and James had located other fighter units being held back due to the confusion in the control tower. Some of these units' hangars were likewise under attack. Once the alarm had been given, ground forces quickly moved in to support the beleaguered pilots. In all, three force-units, nine squadrons of fighters, were heading to reinforce the rest of the Ascendancy's fleet.
"Jag," Wyn's voice was just as tightly controlled as Jag was. *"Stay alive out there. Please."*
"Affirmative."
"The other force Spike pilots left behind are making their way into the tower now," Wyn began a small narrative. *"The traitors are falling to blaster fire. Oh, one of them was a Yuuzhan Vong. Or at least I think he was. His face kind of peeled off after he was shot."*
"He was a Vong," Jaina confirmed.
"They're really ugly." Wyn noted with revulsion. There was a pause. *"The control tower is under Nuruodo control again."*
"Heads up," James' voice cut in. *"Planet-side sensors detect several enemy Clawcraft and Vagaari fighters using the planet's atmosphere to mask their approach."*
"*Five squadrons coming up from the planet on an intercept course,"* a different male voice, Cem Fel, warned. *"ETA two minutes."*
"*Force Razor, you have the fighters,"* Jag relayed. *"The rest, continue to follow force Spike to the main engagement zone. Concentrate on enemy Chiss vessels first. The Vagaari will break when the odds are against them."*
Jaina switched over to a private channel. "Are you sure?"
"*It was one of the things Chak taught me,"* Jag said stiffly.
Jaina swallowed, then refocused on the battle field. Chiss Expansionary Defense Force vessels were either on fire or heavily damaged. The exiled families' own ships didn't appear to have fared that much better. It was a match of who-could-blow-up-whom-first, and neither side seemed to be winning. "That wasn't what I meant Jag. I thought we were going to try and preserve as many Chiss vessels as possible."
Silence.
"Jag, you know the Vong will take…."

"*Negate the last order. Focus on all Vagaari vessels first, disable weapons and engines of enemy Chiss vessels second. All enemy fighters are expendable,"* Jag sharply countermanded.
A series of affirmatives came from the Chiss Clawcrafts. If they were surprised or confused about the change in orders, they didn't show it.
"Select target and fire missiles when ready."
Nine squadrons of fighters, over a hundred fighters, unleashed their missile compliments as they streaked into the battlefield. The shocked enemy forces were slow to respond and they were pounced upon by the various Ruling Families' household phalanx fighters. The first wave of missiles alone had completely shredded the non-shielded Vagaari assault ships and cruisers. Before the explosions of these ships had even died, more were added as the Clawcrafts ripped into the Vagaari and enemy Chiss formations. The heavily damaged and weakened shields of the rogue Chiss ships only brought a second or two of extra time, but then these ships were about as defenseless as the Vagaari vessels. Engines and weapons flared incandescently, and the rogue Chiss ship were stopped in their tracks. Ion cannon fire ensured that the ships couldn't even overload their reactors.
The CEDF ships were emboldened by the unexpected arrival of Jag and the others and began to regroup to enter the fray.
"Chiss Expeditionary Defense Force Admiral, this is Colonel Jagged Fel. Do not destroy any of the rogue Chiss vessels present. There is reason to believe that the Yuuzhan Vong wish to weaken the Ascendancy by having us destroy each other. I repeat, do not destroy any of the rogue Chiss vessels."
"You don't have the authority to give me orders ***Colonel*** *Fel***.**" The terse reply came back over open channels.
"But I do," the voice of Baron Soontir Fel sounded. *"Stand down, Admiral. Fire only if fired upon. Enough lives have been lost already."*
"Sir, you're alive?"
"I am, and as Assistant Syndic to House Nuruodo, and commander of the Chiss Expeditionary Defense Force, I am ordering you to stand down."
"Yes…sir," the reply could not have been more reluctant.
"Very good. Now you will accept any order Colonel Fel gives you without complaint. Am I clear?"
"Yes, sir."
"Good. The fleet is yours, Colonel Fel."
The shock and joy from Jag caused Jaina to smile, even as she vaped another Vagaari fighter.

"We'll resolve the family matters at another time. For now, we must ensure that Csilla is still capable of defending herself at a moment's notice."
"As you command."
"Does that meet your approval, Goddess?" Jagged asked over a private channel, sounding a little more like himself.
"Naturally."
"Force Spike Leader, this is High Command. We've just received a message from one of our border colonies. A Yuuzhan Vong fleet is on approach at high speed along the Chasdemonus Route. Two other systems along the Way of Schesa have gone dark."
"Have all available units converge on Naporar," Jag commanded. *"We will not let the Yuuzhan Vong go even one light-year further."*
"Many units are still involved in apprehending members of the exiled families."
Jag switched to an open frequency. *"All Chiss. The Ascendancy has tried to stay out of the war involving the Yuuzhan Vong and the Galactic Alliance. But we have already been involved whether we wanted to be or not. The Yuuzhan Vong have tried to keep us weak and fighting amongst ourselves because they knew we would be a threat. Now that Chiss blood has been spilt, now that Chiss lay dead at the hands of other Chiss, the Yuuzhan Vong are coming to claim Csilla.*
It does not matter which family has claim to the planet at the moment. If we continue to fight amongst ourselves, none of us will be alive to even care. You are all Chiss, exiled or not.
So, my question to both sides is, would you rather keep fighting this war in our tiny corner of the galaxy? Pretend that nothing is wrong in the rest of the galaxy and kill each other over bloodlines and meaningless titles. Or do you want to stand together as Chiss, no matter the house or bloodline, and fight to protect your home world, your very way of life and culture? Because, if the Yuuzhan Vong arrive, the Chiss will be no more. Not just the Ascendancy, but the Ruling Houses, the Exiled Houses, colonies and capital cities; they will all burn.
I have spent the last three years fighting alongside the Galactic Alliance, against the Yuuzhan Vong, and believe me when I say that this is no time to stand alone. Do you want our planets to suffer the same fate as Coruscant and Sernpidal? Or do you want the Chiss to live on? Only together can we stop the Yuuzhan Vong. Together not just united amongst all Chiss, but with the rest of the galaxy as well. I will be at Naporar to fight the Yuuzhan Vong in the name of not only the

Chiss, but the greater good of the galaxy as a whole. I welcome any and all who wish to join me. Force Spike Leader, out."
=}Chapter End{=
A\N: We will say goodbye to several more characters next chapter (up on Wednesday) as things spiral out of control in all story arcs. Chak's death was in the spirit of his canon death, Vagaari grenade, and will become a motivating factor for some of Jag's future actions. For the Mando arc, the Death Watch mini-arc has about three or so chapters and will also have lasting repercussions.
Reviews always welcome of course.

ADA 41

Forty-One
=}I{= =}I{=
The Naporar system was the location of the planet Naporar; headquarters for the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force fleet as well as the home of the Nuruodo Ruling Family. Though most of the ships protecting this vital planet had been recalled to Csilla to defend it against the joint Vagaari-Exiled Family attack, there were still some light frigates and patrols ships in orbit.
"Colonel Fel, your presence has been expected. We have orders from Assistant Syndic Fel to follow your lead," the control tower on Naporar sent upon the arrival of Jag and the rest of force Spike.
"Spike Leader copies, Naporar Control," Jag replied with a calm he definitely did not feel.
Though his father obviously had confidence in him to command the defenses of the Ascendancy, he was not so sure. Even when he had been given command of a portion of Hapes' fleet, his group had been the ambushing force and not on the hold-the-line-and-get-their-butt-kicked side of things.
In this case, there wasn't even an ambushing fleet available, and most of the Chiss ships had been heavily damaged battling each other. Just like what the Yuuzhan Vong had wanted. He didn't even have the same number of ships, or even any heavy cruisers, to help him. The Chiss Expansionary Defense Force relied on their frigates and picket-ships to patrol their borders. A handful of newly made, and now damaged, Chiss Star Destroyers, were a far cry from the two dozen Hapan Battle Dragons and Nova-class battle cruisers that had been at his disposal.
"Do we have an approximate on the number of hostiles approaching?"

"*Last reports said a dozen and a half capital ships, Spike Lead. No other details. Any information from Ornfra and beyond is unclear due to the political instability in that region."*
"Force Spike Leader, this is Alpha Two. Force Razor and force Lance have joined us," Shawnkyr reported over a separate channel. "*A frigate and fighter squadron from the exiled Chaf family have also arrived and pledge their support to our cause."*
"A Chiss Destroyer under command of the Mitth family has also arrived," the squadron leader of Spike-Beta reported.
One by one, Chiss vessels limped into the Naporar system, some were still on fire. Jag watched their arrival with a mix of relief and trepidation. He didn't see any easy way out of the coming battle. There was no doubt that lives *would* be lost.
"This is Naporar Control, contact with Ornfra has ceased, the planet has gone dark. ETA of hostile fleet in one hour."
"And the fleet detected approaching along the Chasdemonus Route?"
"Between last contact with the Colony Phalanx and estimated speeds of the fleet coming along the Way of Schesa, one hour as well. The attack is well coordinated."
Jag grimaced. The last thing he needed was a punctual enemy commander leading the fleet.
"Csilla Control has given us the numbers, all available ships have arrived."
Jag grimaced again. The last thing he wanted was a fleet that was numerically inferior to the enemy fleet. Five Chiss Star Destroyers and a handful of frigates, all of them battle-scarred, was not a good way to start off the battle. "This is Spike Lead. I want a report from all force-units on level of battle-readiness."
Jag listened to the incoming reports. The only thing the Chiss seemed to have a lot of was their Clawcrafts. In addition to the three surviving forces that had taken off with force Spike on Csilla, there were two other intact forces, and three more cobbled together from various broken forces. This battle all hinged on whether or not their fighters would be enough against the capital ships.
"All Clawcraft, dock to refuel and refill missile compliments. Crews aboard Chiss Expansionary Defense Force ships and at Naporar hangar bays, you have fifty minutes to service these fighters. Assigning each of you a Clawcraft force now." Jag quickly sorted out the various Clawcraft squadrons, and soon every single fighter was either docked on a Chiss capital ship, or making use of Naporar's own hangar bays. As the hub of the Chiss military, Naporar was more than capable of handling the large amount of fighters.

The sense of urgency was clear as fighters began to re-emerge back into space. The service crews were as efficient as ever, understanding that if they couldn't do their job in record time, it quite possibly meant that their lives would be forfeit. Jag nodded to the crewmen tending to his Clawcraft, received permission to depart, and swiftly rejoined the rest of the defending forces with a full tank of fuel and a full load of missiles.

The intricate ballet of fighters moving in and out of vessels continued for several dozen tense minutes. But the services crews pulled it off, and with time to spare, the Chiss Clawcrafts formed out into a screen in front of their less-intact capital ship support.

"Force Lance, force Nova, and force Blade will handle enemy fighters," Jag doled out his orders. "Force Razor, Spike, and Homeguard will concentrate on the capital ships. Jedi Solo will send all of you any intelligence her astromech has on the Yuuzhan Vong vessels to augment what Shawnkyr and myself have reported."

As he spoke, his computer chirped to indicate that it had indeed received an information packet.

"Force Spike, our primary goal will be to take out the enemy command vessel. Force Razor and Homeguard will focus on the yammosk-carrying ship."

"How will we know which one that is, Spike Leader?" Force Razor's colonel asked.

"It will likely be adjacent to the command vessel and will withdraw behind it upon our approach," Jag said. "Their yammosk vessels are considered sacred so they are the only ships allowed to withdraw during combat. If force Spike or the Jedi ambassador recognizes it, we will designated it as priority one. Once the yammosk is destroyed, victory is much more likely."

"Will two forces be enough?" Shawnkyr asked over a private line. *"Force Razor is one of our elite forces, but Homeguard is one of the mismatched ones. They're not used to pitch battles."*

"They'll have to learn quickly," Jag replied, sharing her doubts. But there was nothing he could do about that for now. He continued on over the fleet-channel before he could second guess himself. "All other forces hang back and protect the capital ships. Assist if you see a need, I will leave this judgment up to your force leaders. Capital ships, concentrate on laying covering fire for the fighters. If you feel like your ship can engage a Vong capital ship, do so only if victory is certain. We cannot afford needless sacrifice at this point in time. Similarly, I shall leave it to the judgment of the admiral and captains as to what constitutes a certain victory. Are there any questions?"

There were none. Minutes ticked by, and then, as expected, a Yuuzhan Vong fleet of over nearly three dozen vessels dropped out of hyperspace directly in Naporar's gravity well. Jag instantly noted each of their types. Fifteen of these vessels were a mix of heavy and light cruisers, ten were frigate-class, and another five were Yuuzhan Vong battleships. He also recognized two carriers, a Yuuzhan Vong interdictor, and a Matalok command cruiser. Coralskippers by the dozens were already streaming out of the carriers and cruisers.
"Force Spike, force Homeguard, force Razor, follow my lead in."
The nine squadrons of coralskippers roared head-long into the battle. As the coralskippers moved to engage, a second group of Clawcraft slammed into the enemy craft with a full on barrage of laser and missile fire. The coralskippers broke formation and scattered, while Jagged led his own force straight through the hole that had opened up. The Yuuzhan Vong capital ships began to open fire with everything they had, moving to shield the Matalok and the ships adjacent to it. Two Clawcraft disappeared in the barrage of plasma. Another lost control trying to avoid a projectile and slammed into the side of a Yuuzhan Vong frigate. Jag was suddenly reminded of Ebaq 9 and the scant room the fighters had to maneuver. All around them, in an ever shifting maze, were the organic tendrils and hulls of the living vessels the Yuuzhan Vong used for their fleet.
The cockpit of one of the fighters in Spike-Gamma flared incandescently. Another fighter suddenly had its wing pylons sheared off, even though it hadn't been hit by plasma.
"*Spike Lead. Homeguard Lead, Razor Lead. They just released a butt-load of grutchin, careful,"* Jaina warned, her cautionary advice explaining the mysterious deaths of the two Clawcraft pilots.
Her warning was accented by a bug-face that suddenly popped into his cockpit from above. The creature quickly scurried to one of the controls and began thrashing it with its spike-like teeth. Jag pulled his blaster and fried the creature, and then barely yanked his fighter out of the way of an incoming plasma missile.
The closer they got to the command cruiser, the more blistering the anti-fighter fire became.
"Jedi One, have you spotted the yammosk ship yet?"
"I've narrowed it down to two possible ships. Can you have your people fire one volley at each? The one that retreats is the yammosk ship. The one that advances is just an escort."
"Affirmative," Jag switched frequencies. "Razor Lead, Homeguard Lead. Jedi One will be transmitting targeting solutions for two vessels. One is

likely to hold the yammosk. Have half your fighters fire a single warhead, then engage the ship that withdraws."
"Roger, Spike Lead."
"Homeguard Lead copies."
"Force Spike, we're engaging the Matalok cruiser. Set your warhead launchers to fire tubes at point six seconds apart. Fire only on designated areas, and only on my command," Jag ordered. "If we time it right, the missiles will bypass the void defenses. It is a tactic that was used to great success on Borleias."
As the Clawcraft continued their erratic approach to their prey, coralskippers held in reserve began dropping off the other Yuuzhan Vong capital ships like dive-bombers.
"Stay the course," Jag ordered. He could feel sweat dripping down his brow despite the calm in his words. The coralskippers opened fire, and another Clawcraft went down in flames. Jag saw his targeting computer reach a firing solution. "Spike Alpha, fire one, fire two."
A streak of missiles flared out from the twelve Clawcraft in the lead. Jag tracked his own warhead with careful precision, all the while shaking two coralskippers off of his tail. "Spike Alpha, detonate warhead one."
Before the voids of the Matalok could activate to swallow the warheads, the torpedoes exploded in balls of shrapnel, peppering the side of the ship with white-hot debris. The voids flared to life a split second too late, and then dissipated when the ship sensed damage to itself. Point six seconds later, faster than the ship or the crews responsible for the voids could process, the second torpedo fired by Spike-Alpha found their mark; streaking right through the moment the voids deactivated. Completely unopposed, the wave of torpedoes exploded across the dovin-basal region of the Matalok cruiser.
"Spike-Beta, Gamma, fire at will," Jag breathed, and the two other squadrons released their warheads at the bridge of the ship. "Spike-Alpha, get set up for a second run. We've only hurt it."
The bridge area of the Matalok was shattered by the impact of a multitude of torpedoes, and when the warheads detonated, the entire command area of the Matalok was decimated with a sheet of flame. Even then, more Clawcraft were falling to the intense anti-fighter bombardment and the coralskippers frantically trying to protect their leaders. Looking at his sensors, Jag could tell that Spike-Beta had been reduced to just five fighters, and Spike Gamma was down to seven. And that was just his force, he didn't even want to know how the others were faring.

Another explosion, and suddenly the controlled way the coralskippers were swarming ended. It was as if the pilots of the coralskippers had gone from being veteran pilots to complete rookies. But it did not seem to matter much.
"Spike Lead, Razor Lead here, our target has been neutralized. Unfortunately, we're taking heavy losses. Homeguard Leader is dead, and we're down to sixty-percent strength."
"You've done your job, get back to the rest of the fleet." Jag concentrated on lining up for the second attack run on the Matalok. The Yuuzhan Vong cruiser's weapons were still active, and Jag couldn't take the chance that the enemy commander had survived. "Spike-Alpha, fire warheads."
The last of Spike-Alpha's warheads streamed out and devastated the area that had already been burnt and shattered by the first volley. Several of the torpedoes slipped deep into the ship and detonated, causing massive internal damage to the command cruiser. A second run by Spike-Beta and Gamma dealt the cruiser a death blow. The entire cruiser seemed to contract for a fraction of a second, before a massive explosion tore it to pieces.
"Force Spike, retreat back to friendly lines."
Just because the Yuuzhan Vong were leaderless and uncoordinated, didn't mean that they weren't dangerous, however, and a call came in that chilled Jag completely. *"Spike Lead, this is Alpha Two. I'm hit."*
"Alpha Two? Status?"
"Took a direct hit from a coralskipper. Losing power. Structural integrity of fighter is failing." Shawnkyr's voice was monotonous, as if she was simply reporting the weather.
"Spike Lead, get the rest of your people clear," Jaina ordered. "*You have a fleet to lead and they can't do it without you. I'll use the Force and drag Alpha Two to safety if I have to."*
Jag glanced at Jaina's X-wing. It was missing an S-foil and badly burned. It was clear that she had ridden out an explosion from a plasma missile. "Jedi One..."
"Jedi One, negative," Shawnkyr cut Jag off. *"Leave me and continue to cover Colonel Fel. Even if you get to me, my ion drive is nearing critical."*
"Shawnkyr..."
"Spike Lead, continue to fall back, I'll cover you the best I can."
"Alpha Two..."
"Shawnkyr..."

"Jedi One, you're Alpha Two now, watch his back." Shawnkyr said with the faintest of emotions in her voice. *"It was great serving with you, Colonel Fel."*

Jag closed his eyes, trying his best to keep his face stoic and his voice calm. "You as well, Shawnkyr."

Shawnkyr's Clawcraft limped around and began firing from her single remaining wing. Jag watched with his ship's rear sensors as she managed to take out two more coralskippers in a last act of defiance. Before the enemy fire reached her own fighter, what was left of her engine drive pulsated brightly, then exploded, tearing the fighter apart. There was nothing left of Shawnkyr or her fighter but floating pieces of debris.

Pain clenched Jag's heart, and he desperately tried to clamp down on it as he turned off the rear-display. It was war, people died. His friends died. His…brother died. The only way he could honor their memory was see that they had not died in vain. He still had a Yuuzhan Vong fleet to beat.

"The is Spike Leader, the enemy command and control ships have been destroyed. Form up and collapse any pockets of coordinated resistance." Jag somehow managed to get all this out without a hint of emotion in his voice.

This battle was far from over.

=}II{= =}II{=

Jacen followed the Kaleesh warleader through the carved stone halls of the Shrupak, the most sacred of Kaleesh temples. Behind him, Waxarn Kel, and the teenagers Si'ada and Natua, kept pace. Set up within small alcoves all along the walls were mummified corpses covered in dust and debris. The Kaleesh leader led the way with a single torch that danced eerily across the features of the desiccated corpses. A faint wind was blowing outside, causing a whistling sound to echo through the triangle hallways and the torch to flicker continuously.

The corrupted waves of Force energy didn't make things any more pleasant. The hatred and loneliness of the two confined Sith was present in every pulse, staining the very stone of the pyramid with its taint. Added to this were the distant howls and cries of the creatures living within the temple, their own hunger and animalistic instincts enhanced by the twisted Force energies flooding from the core of the structure.

"Urgh," Si'ada shuddered, rubbing her arms as they neared a heavy door. A neat circle had been cut into the center of the stone barrier, just the right height for a Kaleesh Sith. "Could those Sith have made the Force feel any more icky than it is now?"

"'Icky'?" Waxarn said in amusement.
"I feel like I'm going to need a very long shower after this," Si'ada said, making a face.
"It's going to be worse the further in we go," Jacen motioned to the opening.
"And you will be going on without me." The Kaleesh leader bowed her head politely. "Beyond this door is the inner sanctum of the Shrupak. There are five different paths to the fountain of power. Each corresponds with a task one of our priests had to do to gain access to that most sacred of rooms. I have never been down any of the paths myself, but I know that the younger priests often spoke of visions and lessons of the past and future. With the corruption created by the off-worlders, I am not sure what you will face."
"Thank you for the warning," Jacen said, returning the Kaleesh leader's gesture. "We will do our best to respect your people's traditions."
"Wait, you said that there were five paths," Waxarn said quickly. "Won't we need five people to enter the inner sanctum?"
"The rituals normally do call for five priests," the Kaleesh leader said, as if suddenly remembering that particular detail. She frowned, as if unable to believe how she had forgotten such a vital piece of information.
"Then it is a good thing I tagged along, no?" Vergere's voice seemed to come from every shadow.
"Vergere?" Jacen glanced back down the path they had come. It was empty.
"Over here, Jacen." Everyone whipped their gazes around to find Vergere's diminutive form standing right in the middle of the carved-out circle in the heavy stone door.
"What?!" Si'ada gasped. "How'd you get in front of us? Never mind. Forget that! How come we couldn't even sense you?"
Vergere tisked loudly. "My, my, whatever are the apprentices being taught these days?"
"Vergere," Jacen raised an eyebrow. "Not that I'm not glad you didn't come along, but why *did* you follow us?"
"I was bored outside?" Vergere said with a mock face of sadness. "Or maybe I was curious about what was *inside*?"
"This temple?" Waxarn folded his arms in front of his chest.
Vergere smiled faintly and inclined her head in silent acknowledgement, not quite answering his question. "They say Force energy such as the type that is swirling around us has a way of revealing someone's true character. What do you think it will reveal

about you, Waxarn Kel? What ghosts from your past will it bring up? What love lost will your tormented mind conjure up?"
"I am not afraid of ghosts or visions," Waxarn said stiffly.
"Of course not," Vergere's head bobbed sympathetically. "You are a far greater Jedi Knight than most. You lead and people follow. They trust you and respect you. Yet, despite this, you and your followers remain outcasts, on the fringe of the Order, while people like Anakin Solo and Jacen Solo command the respect of all. Why is that?"
"Enough Vergere," Jacen said, placing a hand on Waxarn's shoulder. "Now is not the time to debate philosophy and semantics. We need to close the Force nexus, or at least purify it, before its corruption becomes permanent."
"As you wish," Vergere bowed lowly. She rose, then held up a finger, as if a thought had just occurred to her. "And have you, Jacen Solo, considered what this Force energy might reveal for you?"
"I'll face whatever appears when it comes," Jacen replied bravely.
Vergere smiled faintly. "Of course you will. Come now. Let us not stand in the doorway."
The five Force users passed through the circular cut in the thick stone door. The Kaleesh leader handed them her torch, then motioned that they should light a small well of oil right next to the door. The well was connected to a thin niche that ran alongside the two walls of the ever-descending passage.
Jacen touched the flame to the oil, and there was a small whoosh as the oil ignited. A sheet of green flame flared up in front of the dusty walls, flashing to life throughout the pathway in a chain-reaction that disappeared around a sharp corner somewhere further down the path. The eerie green light brought to life figures carved in relief on the ceiling, and illuminated the thousands of skulls, stacked one on top of another, embedded in the walls. These skulls were Kaleesh, the eye-sockets filled with some type of black stone that glittered in the flickering green light—giving the dead new life. No matter how one walked, it appeared as if these skulls were watching their every movement. Coupled with the miasma and animal-sounds still echoing down the hallway, the place seemed about as inviting as an overgrown graveyard at midnight during the new moon.
"Well then," Waxarn said, tugging at the collar of his tunic as he avoided the unnerving stares of the many skulls. Behind him, Jacen handed the torch back to the Kaleesh leader. "Let's get going."
They advanced slowly, under the watchful gazes of the skulls from the walls and the grotesque faces in relief on the ceiling.

"This is just a little scary," Si'ada swallowed, unable to take her eyes away from the images depicted on the ceiling. She saw two familiar images and recoiled. "Those two faces look like the Sith you guys fought outside."
"I wonder why they were held in this temple," Natua said, following the scenes being depicted on an upper and lower register of the relief. "A temple for the ancestors does not seem like a likely place for a prison."
"Maybe it was the nexus?" Jacen guessed.
"But why leave two Sith next to a power-outlet?" Si'ada said. "That doesn't seem the smartest thing to do, even if the Sith were kept in stasis."
"I guess we'll figure out more once we get to that room," Waxarn shrugged. "Unless you have any ideas, Jedi Knight Vergere?"
"Hmmm?" Vergere appeared to be shaken from whatever she had been concentrating on. "Oh I have many ideas. But if you are referring to our current predicament, I have none. The Jedi of my time had yet to discover that the Sith had survived. They were woefully ignorant and you all know what happened when they finally did realize that a Sith walked among them. For Jedi of the Republic era, the Sith were mere children's stories, lessons of what would happen should one fall to the dark side. They spent more time practicing against blasters and the like than actual lightsaber combat."
"You sound angry," Natua commented.
"I have the luxury to look back on that time and judge the leaders for their missteps and arrogance," Vergere said. "There are probably only a handful of Jedi left from that era who have the fortune to do so. I will be the first to admit, however, that the Jedi had grown complacent and ineffectual. They thought that they were ready for any threat, were prepared for whatever came their way. Had they not been as blind, then perhaps I wouldn't have left the…"
"Wouldn't have left?" Waxarn prompted when Vergere trailed off.
Vergere's smile had fast become forced. "Wouldn't have left with the Yuuzhan Vong. I delayed their arrival as best I could because the Jedi Order and this galaxy as a whole, was not ready for such an invasion. From what I've seen so far, even after forty years, this galaxy *still* wasn't prepared for such an attack."
"You were going to say something else, though," Si'ada said perceptively.
"Was I?" Vergere tilted her head. "I may have been affected by the miasma, just like you. No one is immune from the dark side, after all."
"Tell me about it," Si'ada muttered. "You aren't at all worried about your brother, Jedi Solo? I mean, what he did was big-time dark side,

wasn't it? I thought Anakin was supposed to be the hero of the Order, so what's he doing throwing around lightning and fire?"
"Those are good questions," Jacen said softly. He had thought he had understood how his brother viewed the Force, thought Vergere's explanation of the Force made sense. Yet, if there was no dark side, how could he explain what he had seen his brother do? It was certainly beyond the ability of any Jedi. Anakin hadn't even been shaken by what he had done. Had acted as if he had just lifted a stone or pushed a rock along the ground. Even skeletal in appearance, he hadn't seemed at all disturbed that he had just used the Force to destroy. If that wasn't dark. If there was no dark side of the Force, what was that?
=}III{= =}III{=
A Chiss frigate erupted into a brilliant ball of fire. A Star Destroyer broke apart mid-section from the constant barrage of five Yuuzhan Vong capital ships. Several picket-ships were destroyed in a hail of plasma. Even without the yammosk and commander, the Yuuzhan Vong outnumbered the Chiss capital ships several times over. They didn't need a yammosk to tell them to fire at the capital ships of the Chiss fleet, the ships were big enough targets as it was. The Clawcraft forces did their best to defend the capital ships, but their warhead armament had been depleted and their fighter-based laser cannons did very little damage to the larger Vong cruisers and frigates. The Yuuzhan Vong continued to advance in an unruly mob of vessels, making up in sheer number for what they lacked in strategy and discipline. The alien invaders were indeed taking losses, but not enough. Elements of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet had already begun an orbital bombardment of military positions on the Chiss-held planet of Naporar and the Chiss had no response.
"This Spike-Gamma Lead, I'm hit!"
"Razor-Beta Five, I'm going down!"
"The Temperance's bridge just received a direct hit."
"That was Nova-Alpha five. Force Nova is all gone!"
"This is the captain of the Chiss Star Destroyer Radiance, any more damage and we'll be joining the Echo and Farbringer, we have to pull back."
Jag heard the reports, the incessant chatter reporting one death after another as the Chiss Ascendancy made their stand. Coralskipper wave after wave continued to immolate themselves against the Chiss defenders, winning the battle of attrition at a frightening pace. The eight-strong force of Clawcrafts had been reduced to a little over two and a half, with more fighters being destroyed by the second. The pilots, already tired from their sortie over Csilla, were having their

endurance and abilities stretched to their very limits in the prolonged dogfight over Naporar. Jag could even feel himself tiring. The losses of Shawnkyr and Chak, coupled with his own injuries and the sweat that stung his eyes. Jag knew it would only be a matter of time before he too lost his edge.
"I could use some suggestions right about now, Jaina," Jag said, gritting his teeth as he steered his battered fighter into a squad of coralskippers.
"Funny, I was just about to ask if you had any more ideas," Jaina's voice was equally strained. *"We have to fall back to Csilla and regroup. If we stay here we'll only get vaped."*
Jag fired on a coralskipper and watched its cockpit explode. "If we give ground here, we might not be able to regain any momentum. We can't allow the Yuuzhan Vong to entrench themselves in any position."
Another pause as they broke off to endure another wave of suicidal coralskippers. Finally, Jaina's voice sounded once more. *"I just noticed that the High Dynasty wasn't among the ships that arrived. Do you think your dad's holding ships in reserve?"*
"Naporar Control said that all available reinforcements have arrived."
In the background, another Chiss frigate flared and began a death dive into Naporar's atmosphere.
"About that," Jaina said, her fighter spinning away from two missiles. *"Are we completely sure that everyone in the Nuruodo family wants the Chiss to win?"*
"What are you implying?" Jag momentarily slipped behind Jaina's heavily damaged fighter as he gave her time to explain.
"I was thinking. The Ascendancy almost lost Csilla because the exiles and Vagaari took advantage of the Chiss adherence to discipline and order. The Chiss are trained to obey their superiors, to trust the authority, more so than New Republic soldiers. If we hadn't discovered that the control tower had been compromised, force Spike and the other forces would never have taken off because they were ordered to stay grounded. Wyn also said that there had been a Vong in the Csilla control tower. If the Vong know that Naporar is a stronghold in the Ascendancy, then they would have people on the ground as well. What if your father passed on a message, but a Vong in the control tower on Naporar neglected to mention all of it?"
Jag hesitated for a fraction of a second, and then hit his fighter's emergency long-range communication's console. The Chiss defensive line was collapsing on all fronts and there wasn't much time. "This is force Spike Leader to all Chiss Expansionary Defense Force units, Naporar Control has been compromised. Requesting immediate

reinforcements. Repeat, all Chiss Expansionary Defense Force units, all Colonial Phalanx forces, converge on Naporar."
For several long moments, nothing happened. Chiss vessels continued to burn up and the mass of Yuuzhan Vong ships, though definitely decreased in number, still advanced. The number of coralskippers was much less than before, down to a handful of squadrons. That was still more than the number of Clawcraft left, however, and it left the remaining Chiss capital ships vulnerable to coralskipper strafing runs. Jag felt his heart begin to sink.
Then, five Chiss Star Destroyers, three of them brand new, suddenly appeared; their gleaming white forms lancing out from hyperspace and immediately opening fire. Torrents of blue and green poured down onto the startled Yuuzhan Vong formation, and yorik coral was hurled off into space as more than one Yuuzhan Vong ship detonated under the intense barrage. A fresh wave of Clawcraft emerged from the Star Destroyers, swarming in and lighting up the remaining coralskippers with ease.
More Chiss frigates arrived, some bearing the markings of the Colonial Phalanx, others surprisingly enough, had the markings of the Household Phalanx. With these ships were *Nssis*-class Clawcraft, next-gen fighters, further emphasizing the Household Phalanx's name.
The lead frigate broadcasted on all Chiss channels. "*This is Commander Hess'irolia'nuruodo, to force Spike Leader. Withdraw your ships behind our screen and we'll finish off what you've started."*
The Household Phalanx-marked frigates and fighters took the lead and charged ahead of the reinforcements.
The confidence the Yuuzhan Vong had in obtaining a victory was promptly shattered by the arrival of the rest of the Chiss Defense fleet. But like all Yuuzhan Vong, they didn't retreat. They continued to throw themselves in suicidal charges at the reinforced Chiss line, setting collision courses or blowing their main drives in hopes of taking out as many Chiss as possible.
Jag and what was left of the first defenders managed to successfully fall back behind the new line of Chiss vessels, getting a much needed reprieve. The five Chiss Star Destroyers began one final push, spearheading a counter-attack with the House Phalanx frigates and fighters. A second line of Colonial Phalanx and Expansionary Defense Force frigates picked off any Vong ship that managed to slip through the web.
The seconds passed by much quicker for Jag as he watched the Vong advance grind to a halt, then gradually reverse itself. Without a yammosk, there was no coordination among the enemy fleet, no

instructions as to how to counter this new attack. What had started as a Yuuzhan Vong massacre of the Chiss forces was fast becoming a massacre of the Yuuzhan Vong invasion force.
Then, surprising everyone, Baron Soontir Fel's voice boomed out over an open channel. "*All Yuuzhan Vong forces. Surrender now and your lives will be spared. Interdictors are barring your escape from here. Only by surrendering will you be allowed to live. Any other actions apart from the powering down of your weapons and engines will be construed as hostile and you will be fired upon.*"
"Jaina?"
"*I didn't say anything,*" Jaina said, sounding equally surprised.
Several fleeing ships were shot down, while the rest were slowly corralled into a kill-zone. One by one, Yuuzhan Vong ships began to go silent. There were still some hold-outs, but they did not last long. It was apparent that the surviving Yuuzhan Vong had no wish to die so far away from their homes in a war they no longer wanted.
"*Colonel Fel,*" the voice of the Chiss commander, Irolia said, business-like. "*Would you be interested in escorting myself and a security team to the Naporar control and discover why communication between our two forces broke down?*"
Jag exhaled, finally relaxing in his pilot's chair. "I'd be honored, Commander. Jedi Solo will join us. She will be able to tell us if there are any Yuuzhan Vong in the control room."
"*I will see you ground-side, Colonel. Irolia out.*"
Jag set course and contact Jaina. "Are you ready to finish this, Goddess?"
"*Definitely. Any Vong and their friends are going to pay for causing so many deaths,*" Jaina's voice was terse, and Jag knew she was still thinking about Shawnkyr.
Jag tightened his grip around his steering yoke. "That they will."
=}IV{= =}IV{=
Outside of the temple, Anakin Solo was in the process of explaining just what he and Alema had done to a very irate and worried Mara Jade Skywalker. An equally concerned Tahiri had her heart and stomach clenching painfully as she looked at his sickly-thin countenance. She stood at his side and rested a hand on his shoulder, trying to use her own Force energies to help him however she could.
Alema was reclined on a fallen slab of stone, her eyes closed as she continued to repair the damage the dark side energies had caused. Despite the fact that the Twi'lek had released all the dark energy she had gathered, one of her eyes still retained its yellow hues.

"It's something we learned when we were training at the *Home*," Anakin said, his gaunt features and Jedi clothing making him appear as some type of ascetic.
"The *Home?"* Mara spoke up.
"The asteroid where we trained," Alema clarified. "There we learned to accept *all* aspects of the Force."
Mara stiffened. "The two of you never said much about what you learned. But I am really not liking what you're saying."
"Aunt Mara," Anakin said softly. He understood why she was so concerned. In a way, he was glad that she had been the master to see his and Alema's little show, and not one of the others. Mara, at least, would give them the benefit of a doubt. "Neither Alema or I used what you would call the 'dark side' of the Force. At least not in the way you think."
"You seem to assume a lot of what I am thinking," Mara said archly.
"Both Alema and I absorbed the dark energy of the miasma. But what you would call the dark side of the Force is actually made up of two different things. There is the Force, and then there is the negative emotions that have been woven into that Force energy to make it 'dark.' Just like killing someone can be light or dark depending on the intention of the one doing the killing, the Force can be light or dark based off of the emotions of the user."
"The Force is not inherently light or dark," Alema added. "That light side, dark side, stuff never made any sense to me anyway. If we all focus on one part and close ourselves off to the other, it's no wonder the Sith keep popping up every so often. It's like knowing there's a danger but purposefully deciding not to learn anything about it. To remain blind and deaf to a threat that keeps taking down successive Jedi Orders."
"That still doesn't explain how the two of you did what you did," Mara said sternly; well aware that the other Jedi, though they were helping the Kaleesh with the bodies, were listening in. "If there is no dark side in the Force. Why do the two of you look like hell?"
"We used the energy from the miasma to boost our Force powers, true," Anakin said. "But we didn't inject our emotions into the attacks. What makes a Sith a Sith is that they use both the Force and their darker emotions in tandem to create as much damage as possible. In their case they *want* to cause pain and damage, to dominate. Their heightened emotional state causes them to use far more Force energy than needed, resulting in the extremely damaging nature of their attacks. The Sith are powered by their emotions and consumed by them. It was why, during that enclave on Mon Cal, I told the other Jedi

that it was okay to feel strong emotions, but only if they didn't use those emotions to dictate their actions."
"As for how we did what we did? Since the Force is one whole, it *is* possible to use what many consider 'dark' Force abilities, without actually going dark yourself," Alema shrugged. She held up a hand and, focusing hard on her hatred of the Yuuzhan Vong, lightning crackled at her fingertips. "You're only dark if you put your feelings into the attack, if you deliberately want to hurt another just for the fun of it or to prove a point." She closed her hand to extinguish the lightning. "What Anakin and I did, was use the 'dark side' energy we absorbed to enhance our own abilities. We, however, trapped the negative emotions laced within that Force energy, the desire to hurt, in our own bodies. We used our bodies like a filter, so to speak. *That's* why we ended up looking like we do now. The emotional barrier helped us endure the Sith's psychological attacks, and understand how they were offensively using the Force so we could counter their attacks. Is it still 'dark' if we sacrifice our own bodies to prevent negative emotions from hurting anyone else? Was what *I* did, taking all of that Sith's hate and anger so that he could rejoin the Force without regret, dark?"
Mara met Alema's challenging gaze unflinchingly. "It may not be dark, but it sure was stupid as heck."
"Unwise," Tahiri agreed, squeezing Anakin's shoulder warningly. "To the extreme."
"I'm not arguing against that," Anakin laughed hoarsely. He rubbed at his throat ruefully. He still sounded like an old man in his opinion. "Normally tainted Force energy only causes this much damage over a long period of time. Alema and I just happened to absorb as much of the miasma as we could to protect the others and allow them to stay as unaffected as possible."
"Which we are definitely not doing again anytime soon," Alema said.
"Well, unless we find another temple with Sith trapped inside right next to a massive well of Force energy."
"What are the odds," Anakin said wryly.
"Listen, Anakin," Mara narrowed her eyes. "What you and Alema are saying make sense from a certain point of view. But be careful that you don't let your confidence turn to arrogance. That you become so engrained in your beliefs that it actually does make you fall to the dark side. I'm not saying I disagree with you, or that either of you will even fall, but for the sake of myself and most of the Order, I don't want to see a repeat of this unless the situation absolutely calls for it. You already know that you're an influential member of the Order. That others will try to emulate you. Tell me, will even a small fraction of

them have the will power you and Alema have? Will they be able to still think clearly after absorbing what you and Alema have?"
Anakin saw her point. "Probably not."
"Exactly." Mara said. "And that's only the ones who agree with your view of the Force. You know that Kyp and some of the others who have had brushes with the dark side…" She held up a hand to forestall Anakin's protest. "For those who let their darker emotions get the better of them, your view will be extremely controversial to them. Some might even be insulted by your view. As revolutionary as your idea might be, at the moment, the Jedi Order is just *not* ready for it. Especially since you, Jacen, and Jaina brought everyone together only a couple weeks ago."
"I understand," Anakin breathed, glad that Mara had taken it as well as she had.
"You know, that sounds a lot like what Vergere was telling me about," Jysella said meekly.
"I've talked with her too, and what I said does sound like a lot like what Vergere has told me. But Vergere takes the concept one step further." Anakin turned towards the young apprentice and waved her over. Jysella hesitantly sat cross-legged in front of Anakin. "She calls it the 'Unifying Force' theory. To her there really is no 'dark' side of the Force at all, just that one, unifying Force. In simplest terms, the Force for her is like a blaster or any other tool. Just because a blaster is fired doesn't make it good or bad. The Force is whatever we make of it, whatever we want to do with it. Blaming the Force would be like blaming the blaster when you were the one who pulled the trigger. Since bad and good are subjective, it all depends on the point of view of the person who has the blaster."
"You don't agree with her?" Jysella asked.
"It's hard to when I look at what my grandfather and the Emperor did to the galaxy," Anakin said with a shake of his head. "Sure they didn't truly see themselves as evil, but at the same time, what else could their actions have been called? I think that to completely disregard a 'dark side' of the Force is akin to turning a blind eye to the Sith. The Sith differ from the Jedi in more ways than just philosophy after all. But, Vergere's entitled to her own opinions and beliefs, and like Master Skywalker said earlier, it does make sense from a certain point of view. But you're right, it's not a point of view I agree with."
His explanation to Jysella seemed to drain the rest of the tension out of Mara's shoulders.
"What about your brother?" The Bothan apprentice, Yaqeel, asked. "Jacen?"

"If you and Jedi Knight Vergere both believe that the Force is something other than what Master Skywalker and the others are saying, what does Jacen believe in?"
Anakin blinked, as if he hadn't really considered that question before. For the longest time, they had been at odds, and now he had just gone along with a 'agree to disagree' attitude with his brother's philosophies to avoid damaging their newly repaired relationship. "You know, I'm not really sure."
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What do you believe in? The voice whispered in Jacen's mind as his eyes adjusted to the change in lighting. The group of five Force users had followed the winding path until it had split up into five directions, just as they had been warned. Each of them had gone down a different path, and a stone slab lowered behind them, ensuring that they only had one way forward. The slab cut off the dancing light of the green flame, allowing no light through.
The path ahead, a narrow beam of stone that zigzagged back and forth as it stretched over a deep pit; was unsupported and looked extremely unstable. Yet the stone path showed signs of heavy wear.
Two large braziers within the pit almost a dozen meters below provided faint illumination, casting a shadow of the zigzag pathway onto the ceiling of the chamber. When Jacen peered over the edge, the light from the braziers also revealed all sorts of animals prowling below. Amid the predators and smaller mammals were skeletons of all sorts, some recognizably Kaleesh.
As he watched, one of the larger predatory creatures pounced on a smaller mammal that hadn't been fast enough to escape.
"Wow, that's a great example of the dark side, don't you think, Jace?"
Jacen looked to his side and saw a ghostly form of his younger brother looking over the ledge with him. Knowing that Anakin was only an apparition created by the heavily concentrated Force energy flowing from the nexus, Jacen allowed a small smile. "I suppose you *would* be the specter my brain conjures up for a discussion about the Force. And that wasn't an example of the dark side. A predator hunts to feed itself and its family. That's just nature."
"*And the dark side isn't?"* The ghostly form of Anakin smiled. *"I always thought the danger of the dark side was that it <u>is</u> natural: that's why it's easier than the light. That's why we have to listen to every single Jedi Master caution us about giving into our feelings."*
Jacen frowned at the apparition of his brother; even as a Force-created imprint based off of his own mind, Anakin still was a persuasive as ever. "Well yes…"

"*What separates the titles of Jedi and Sith? The Jedi, as we were taught, are told to control their emotions, to fear aggression, violence, and passion. We're told that the Sith give into these emotions, allow their more natural, baser selves to control their actions.*"
"Yes, that's why that predator killing to feed his family, *isn't* an example of the dark side," Jacen argued, frowning at his brother's image. "Now if that predator slaughtered an entire herd, just for the fun of it, because it simply enjoyed killing. *That,* is dark."
"*And the predator takes no joy in its successful kill?*"
Jacen glanced over the edge again and watched for a moment as the predator shivered in delight at its meal. Through the Force he could feel its sense of accomplishment, its pride that it had slain the defenseless mammal. Even as the rest of the predator's family closed in to feed, there was no doubt that it had enjoyed ripping out the smaller mammal's throat and spilling its blood on the stained stone ground. He didn't answer.
"*Kill one, it's nature, kill them all, it's the dark side?*" The specter of his brother went on. Though Jacen knew that this was simply the Force bringing to life his internal conflicts, to hear the argument aloud and from a look-alike of his brother, seemed to make the view being preached all the more convincing. *"Is the line between nature and dark side only one degree? Is it the dark side if that predator kills only five of those mammals? Ten?"*
"It's the dark side if it kills more than it needs to feed itself and its family," Jacen noted calmly, well aware that he was basically talking to himself. Between the things Vergere had told him and tried to teach him on Coruscant, his own conversations with Anakin about the Force, his own doubts, and what he had just witnessed Anakin do, a part of him was grateful for this chance to gather his bearings. Even if this was some Force vision, test, or whatever, that he needed to do to continue on, Jacen found that he didn't mind at all. "That's the line. Killing when you don't need to kill."
"*And how do you define need?*" This time it was the voice of Vergere, the Fosh Force user appearing on Jacen's opposite side. Like the image of Anakin, Vergere was transparent in some ways, and enigmatic in others. *"Are we talking about the line of starvation, or simply malnutrition? Is it the dark side if they only eat half the slain animal? Does a predator partake of the dark side if its family is a few kilos overweight?"*
"It's not about that—"
"Then what about, Jace?" Anakin cut him off, just like his real self would have.

"Are we back to why? Does intention always trump action?" Vergere harped.
"It's not the dark side for the predator to kill hundreds of those animals and leave them to rot, so long as it thinks it needs them for food?"
"It's not that simple," Jacen insisted, his gaze still focused on the predators in the pit below.
"So you, young Solo, say that you know the dark side when you see it, yes?"
"Yes."
"*Was what I did to those half-Vong outside dark?"*
"Yes."
"Then what is that?" Vergere pointed to the predators feasting on the remains of the mammal.
Jacen didn't have an immediate answer.
"You can't have it both ways, Jace. If what I did was dark, than what those predators are doing are dark too. We both embraced our natural instincts, the will to survive, to protect family."
"You cannot pick and choose, claim something is dark just because it is inconvenient. Claim something is of the Jedi because you believe that what you are doing is right and just."
"I'm not…"
"Not what?" Ghost-Vergere prompted.
"Not…" Jacen hesitated. He couldn't believe he was losing an argument to himself. But at the same time, all these Force images were doing were confirming what he already believed in his heart. It was hard to acknowledge, and Jacen didn't think he would *ever* fully accept the conclusions he was coming to unless something drastic happened.
"What are you, Jacen?" Anakin said seriously.
"Huh?"
"I have told you before, I am not Jedi, nor am I a Sith," Ghost-Vergere chirped, eyes focused on Jacen like they normally were when the real Vergere expected him to make some profound leap of logic and come to a mind-bending conclusion.
"Do you think that I am a Sith for using that lightning and fire? I'm certainly not a Jedi by Uncle Luke's standards and definition."
"What are you?" Vergere repeated.
Jacen swallowed. "No more games."
"We stopped playing games when the war began, Jace."
"This has never been a game, Jacen Solo."
"Do you even know what you are?"
"I'm a Jedi, Anakin. Like you."

Both specters exchanged sad looks, as if Jacen had done something wrong that only they knew about, then faded away. He had a distinct sensation that he had just let them down.
Go on then, Jedi. Go do what you came here to do.
Game over, Jace. You lose.
The path in front of him began to crumble away. Jacen hurriedly ran across the decaying path, feeling the ground fall away right out from his every step. With a herculean effort, he launched himself from the final piece of stone and just managed to grab a handhold in the rocky ledge on the other side. Looking timidly over his shoulder, he saw that the stone walk-way had collapsed on many of the animals that had been in the pit below; including the predator and its family.
Slowly, Jacen pulled himself up into the doorway, shaken by what had just happened and the conclusions he had come to. As the miasma from the corrupted nexus pulsated once more, Jacen shook himself and was reminded of more immediate concerns. Debating about the Force could come later. Right now he had a job to do.
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"*I repeat, Death Watch is on Raxis Prime."*
The alert from Jintar over Dinua's emergency comlink caused Dinua's normally expressionless face to harden in anger, surprising Sannah greatly.
"Death Watch?"
"*Kyr'tsad,* in Mando'a," The teenage Supercommando hissed. "They are little more than terrorists and pirates running around in Mandalorian armor. If they are here, we must cut our training short."
Said training was a wilderness survival regiment, where they camped out far away from the other Mandalorians and lived off what they could find or steal. The previous day's rainstorm hadn't made things any easier, since even the water on the planet was heavily polluted. Sannah hadn't been allowed to bring anything along, not even a pot or a vibroblade. She had spent the last four days living off the small rodents she caught, along with anything else she could get from the Jawas for the parts she found in the various junk piles. The only weapon she had was a blade made out of scrap metal, and a sling-shot Dinua showed her how to make out of spare parts.
Sannah, however, was beginning to appreciate what Dinua was teaching her. Her body had more or less gotten used to the rigorous exercise and training methods Dinua created.
The four days camping, and the two days it had taken to reach their destination, meant that they were the only two beings around for a good distance. Talk had been minimal at first, but the more Sannah

pushed herself into the various training exercisers, the more Dinua seemed willing to share about herself. It had been at the end of the previous day when Dinua finally called her by her name. For some reason, Sannah never felt prouder than at that moment. Even with Dinua's acknowledgement, Sannah still refused to use the Force to aid her.

Unfortunately, deliberately ignoring the Force meant that Sannah had no idea what was happening with Doran and Tyria. The little bit of emotion that had just gotten through, something she couldn't block due to the strength of their bond, had been worrying to say the least.

"They sound a little more than pirates and terrorists," Sannah said hesitantly, slowly standing.

Dinua looked as if she had just eaten one of the sour, metallic tasting rodents they were cooking. "They are disgraces to the armor they wear. They are also Mandalorians, but adhere to the mistaken belief that they can remake the Mandalorian Empire as it once was. Every time they pop up, we Mandalorians hunt them down to keep them from causing too much trouble. We can't have them disgracing the name of 'Mandalorian' after all."

They ducked out of the small shelter they had created using spare parts and gazed back towards the Mandalorian training camp. It was still two days away, and that was if they ran for most of the distance.

"What do we do?" Sannah asked.

"Even if the *Kyr'tsad* have infiltrated the camp, they will have a base of operations elsewhere," Dinua said in answer. "If Raxis Prime had any moons, the base would most likely be there. But since it does not, they will have to be somewhere on this planet. Our patrols would have detected them otherwise."

Sannah followed Dinua out into a clearing. Dinua tapped her communicator several times and her *Gladiator*-class assault fighter arrived a couple of minutes later. She remotely guided it to the ground, and then opened up its storage compartment.

"You can use a blaster, right?" Dinua asked wryly. She tossed a blaster to Sannah, who caught it by the handle.

"I ca…" Sannah noted the sleek, matte, blue-grey colored gun in her hands. It was lighter than other blasters she had held previously and not like any of the standard blasters she had seen.

"It's a WESTAR-40," Dinua said, seeing Sannah's confused look. "Not even mass produced yet. Beviin got it for me straight from the manufacturers when I made the *Or'ramikade."*

"Dinua," Sannah said, offering the gun back in protest.

"A gun's a gun, Sannah," Dinua waved her off, snapping pieces of her Mandalorian armor into place. "It was a gift, and now it's an instrument of death. Just like that knife you made."
"What are you going to use?"
Dinua picked up another gun in her fighter's cargo compartment and held it up. It was a heavily modified blaster carbine of some sort, with a worn-looking bayonet affixed to the barrel of the gun. "My mother's DXR7."
Dinua fitted her helmet into place and turned around, her green armor gleaming in the light of the rising sun. Her blaster whined as she primed it and slung it over her shoulder.
"*Oya, Sannah. Ib'tuur jatne tuur ash'ad kyr'amur.*" *Let's hunt. Today is a good day for someone else to die.*
"Where do we start?"
Dinua held out a small holomap of the area in the palm of her hand. "The *Kyr'tsad* base will be far enough away that our ground patrols and training missions won't accidently find it, but close enough to be in contact with their operatives. The longer the distance between their transmissions, the higher the likelihood that we'll pick up on it. Since any remaining operatives in the camp will be watching how *Mand'alor* responds, it will be up to us to find the base."
She made adjustments to the map, and two rings appeared the holographic image. "These two circles represent the optimum distance for a *Kyr'tsad* outpost. Now, since the area west of camp that falls into these circles is a settlement where we house the militia we're training, we will ignore it. The *Kyr'tsad* aren't exactly the best of neighbors so we would know if they were there." The designated area was lit up in red. "The wastelands to the east are our training grounds. It's risky to have a base in that sector, but not impossible. The eastward direction is also where the Supercommandos go on long-distance survival excursions not unlike the one we're on now."
"But we went north." Sannah pointed out.
"I didn't want you getting in their way," Dinua shrugged, causing Sannah to glower at her; which of course, the Mandalorian teen completely ignored. "That leaves the south and the north as the most likely candidates."
"We're right at the edge of the boundary circle you drew," Sannah observed.
"If the *Kyr'tsad* base is here, it will be close by," Dinua nodded. She tapped the controls at her wrist, and her fighter took off. "The automated systems will alert me if the ship detects…" A red light on

her wrist-controller began to blink. "Apparently the *Kyr'tsad* base is *really* close by."
"Should we go for help?"
"We can take them?" Dinua said as they began to walk at a brisk pace. "How many do you think are there?"
"A dozen, maybe two."
"Wait, you want us to go up against twenty-four Mandalorians?"
"They are hardly Mandalorians," Dinua said with disdain. "Besides, *dar'manda,* what do you think all those lessons I've been teaching you are for? It sure as heck wasn't to make you look good."
"We're back to '*dar'manda',* now?" Sannah said sourly.
"I was premature in calling you by your name."
"I really, really hate you, you know that?"
"The feeling's mutual. No Force, remember that."
"Yeah, yeah."
A rumbling explosion reverberated through the polluted air.
"What was that?"
"My ship being shot down," Dinua said, closing her wrist controller. "At least we know where they are now."
"Greeaat," Sannah drawled, suddenly having an urge to punch someone.
"Let's get to a higher vantage point." Dinua quickly began to scale a very tall pile of junk.
Sannah threw up her arms in exasperation. "Why not?"
At one point, she would have found the task of scaling the junk nearly impossible without the Force. She wasn't even aware of it when she ascended the ten meter-high rubbish heap as if it were nothing.
The morning sun was breaking through the planet's permanent haze when she reached the top, and she could see a cloud of smoke that had been Dinua's fighter.
"There's your fighter."
"I'm sure the *Kyr'tsad* base has more than enough credits to compensate me," Dinua replied, scanning the area through the sensors of her helmet. "There."
Sannah followed Dinua's arm. She was pointing to a denser portion of the scrap-yard, where large parts of different ships had been left abandoned to the harsh elements. Automated systems meant to place the debris on a massive conveyor belt to be melted down into scrap, appeared to be fighting a losing battle against the overwhelming amount of clutter. The bright orange glow emitted by the molten metal stood out in the darkened shadows of the early morning. Sannah

squinted, but they were too high up and too far away for her to be able to make out any detail.
"What do you see?"
"They converted several TIE bodies into turrets," Dinua replied, staring intently at the scrap processing plant. "And…down!"
Dinua shoved Sannah off of their perch, jumping in the process. As they fell, Dinua unwound a grappling hook from her utility belt and launched it at a nearby tower of debris. As the grappling hook arrested their fall, their original perch exploded in a shrapnel-filled firestorm.
"And they have missile launchers," Dinua remarked, breathing heavily as she supported Sannah on one arm and held onto the grappling hook's cable with the other. She swung Sannah against the debris tower and the younger teen was able to get a handhold.
The two began to descend. "Let me guess, we're still going there without calling for back up?"
"Good guess, *dar'manda*."
"Have I mentioned I hate you?" Sannah quipped.
"*Oya, dar'manda."* Sannah had the distinct feeling that Dinua was grinning within the privacy of her helmet. "We have some *Kyr'tsad* bastards to kill."
=}VII{= =}VII{=
Valin and the other apprentices were walking in step with Han Solo as they neared the landing strip where the *Falcon* and the Dozen's X-wings were berthed. The others were currently meeting with Moff Flennic and Sub-Commander Torkal Vorrik to reveal what they knew about the Yuuzhan Vong intelligence network operating within the Remnant. As finicky as the *Falcon* tended to be at times, it would have been a very bad time for it to break down at the moment. There was no telling how Torkal would react to the revelations presented by Leia and Kyp.
"How do you think Torkal will react to the information we show Moff Flennic?" Valin said aloud.
"How else would a temperamental Vong react?" Han snorted. "Why do you think we're starting up the *Falcon*?"
"Good point."
The door from the main building to the landing strip opened. Han and the apprentices all paused. Between them and their ship was a dozen Yuuzhan Vong warriors, all dressed for a fight.
"Sah," Valin recognized one of the warriors.
The lead warrior in charge of the bunch made a motion, and Sah Vorrik stepped out in front of the group.

"*Jeedai* Horn," the young warrior inclined his head in acknowledgement.
"You're here to stop us from getting to our ship?" Seff said, a hand sliding to his lightsaber.
"We are," Sah nodded once. "Torkal predicted that you would attempt to flee once you realized the negotiations were going against you."
"Sah, we don't have to fight," Valin said tersely.
"You are correct. So long as you do not attempt to board your vessel, we do not."
A pained expression passed over Valin's face. "Please, Sah. Stand down."
"I am a warrior of Domain Vorrik, I cannot."
Valin very reluctantly unhooked his lightsaber and held it up. "You'll die."
"Perhaps," Sah's expression was blank as he readied his amphistaff. "But I will have died in the service of my gods. They will uplift me as I breathe my last."
"Kid?" Han said gently, placing a hand on Valin's shoulder. "We don't have much time left."
"I know," Valin exhaled, shaking his head pleadingly at the Yuuzhan Vong in front of him. "Last chance, Sah. Move."
A ghost of a smile fluttered across Sah's features, before the young warrior whirled his amphistaff and lashed out with the first blow. Valin's lightsaber sprang to life, intercepting the attack with an ear-rattling, violent hiss.
"Damn it, Sah!" Valin yelled as two other warriors, Sah's crèche-mates, stepped forward to battle Bazel and Seff. "Don't you want to be something other than a mindless pawn? Don't you want to have a life of your own! You told me you had three children, don't you want to see them grow up! To have a father?"
"I will ensure that they have a father they can be proud of," Sah replied tonelessly, his amphistaff striking Valin's saber repeatedly. "That, if I die today, they will have a father who was honorable. There is no greater gift that a Yuuzhan Vong can give to his children than that; to ensure a high place for them in our status and pride-driven society."
Valin staggered as Sah's amphistaff grazed his arm, drawing blood. Frustration, anger at the universe for pitting them against each other, welled up in the younger Jedi. Seff and Bazel appeared to mirror his frustrations as they too tried to convince the other warriors to stop fighting.
All the while, Han looked on with a heavy, drawn expression on his face, shaking his head in resignation. He knew how it would all end.

Had seen too many situations like this before. It was a harsh lesson to learn, but one the young Jedi had to if they were going to be the next generation of galactic protectors. What shocked Han, however, was that the leader of the group of Yuuzhan Vong warriors appeared to have a similar expression on his face, as if he was thinking the same thing. The leader of the warriors was an older Yuuzhan Vong, with deep scarring in his greyish-purple skin. For a single moment, Han's and this warrior's gaze met, and a silent anguish was shared. They knew what was to come; that only one of them would be walking away from this confrontation.

Valin, blinking back heated tears, went on the offensive. If Sah wanted to fight, he'd give him one. He'd make sure it was a fight that would give Sah's children all the honor in the galaxy if he had to. With a yell, Valin pressed forward, his saber sparking and swishing through the early morning air. He lashed out even as conflict continued to chew him up inside. This wasn't right. It wasn't fair. Why did the war have to pit them against each other?

As skilled as Sah was, Valin had the Force to assist his own movements. In one last flourish of his lightsaber, Valin's blade cleaved through one of Sah's arms, dropping both it and the amphistaff to the ground. Sah hissed, but showed little reaction otherwise.

"It's over," Valin whispered hoarsely.

Sah glanced at the fallen amphistaff, then at Valin.

Valin shook his head. "Don't. Don't do it, Sah."

Sah held Valin's gaze as he bent down on one knee and picked up the amphistaff from his severed arm. Very slowly, sounding regretful, Sah spoke. "I am a warrior, *Jeedai* Horn. A servant of the Supreme One. I will fight until my last breath. You will die, or I will. That is the only truth of this fight."

And Sah lunged again, renewing his attack. His amphistaff slapped across Valin's chest, breaking ribs. Valin wheezed and countered. After several exchanges, they both backed up.

Sah raised his amphistaff.

Valin readied his lightsaber.

They moved at once, darting towards each other with weapons extended.

Both young fighters jerked as their weapons pierced the body of the other. Sah's amphistaff emerged out from Valin's shoulder, but Valin's lightsaber was just below Sah's raised arm, embedded in the warrior's chest.

Sah let out a gasp, and smiled almost contently. Valin's expression was one of pure anguish as their gazes met. With a bloodied hand, Sah

reached out and touched the black pendant Valin wore around his neck. The hand then fell limply to the side. Slowly, Valin watched as the life left Sah's eyes and the warrior crumpled against him. Valin soundlessly deactivated his lightsaber, breathing heavily as he gently laid Sah's body on the ground.
Seff and Bazel had likewise won their own battles, regret and sorrow pulsating from them as the two warriors who could have been their friends collapsed to the ground.
There was a yell of anguish as the other members of Sah's crèche attacked. Valin took it all in with a feeling of intense detachment. Their yells were merely dim echoes.
Their charge in slow motion.
Valin shook his head once more in despair, then reactivated his lightsaber.
Just like that, the volume returned to full and everyone was moving at regular speeds. Valin flowed under his second attacker's wild swing, his saber thrust upwards, skewering the warrior's head through his chin. The body fell, and Valin exhaled.
The body of an enemy.
The last few days had meant nothing.
In the end, Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong really were nothing more than a foe to be defeated.
Not human. Not a sane, sentient being.
Just an enemy.
The rest of the warriors attacked, fighting to the death. Han's blaster pistol shrieked several times. Bazel and Seff cut down another warrior each.
Just an enemy.
An animal.
Valin sliced off the head of another warrior, then spun about to block the attack from another. Han's blaster sounded one last time, and the final warrior dropped to the ground. Cold and dead.
Valin hadn't even realized that he was hyperventilating, his hand shaking, until he felt Han's hand on his shoulder once more.
"Breathe, kid," Han said sympathetically. "Breathe."
Valin tried to, hating the stinging sensation of unshed tears in his eyes. Bazel and Seff reached out through the Force to him, and together, the three of them tried to make some sense of what had just happened.
=}VIII{= =}VIII{=
"I don't buy it!" Maez jabbed a finger in Anakin's direction. "You say you aren't a Sith? That's just barvy! You sure as heck aren't a Jedi. This

galaxy doesn't need another Anakin becoming a Sith Lord. We all saw where the last one got us!"
Anakin mentally pounded his head against the rock he was sitting on as over half of Waxarn Kel's Death Knights stood shoulder to shoulder in front of him. The rest of the Death Knights were standing off to the side, not hurting, but not helping the situation either. Mara was on the opposite side of these 'neutral' Death Knights, holding the hands of apprentices Jysella and Yaqeel. And flanking him were both Tahiri and Alema, their hands twitching on their lightsabers as they warily eyed the wall of seven Knights. The Kaleesh, meanwhile, had gathered on either side and were watching with wide eyes.
"I believe him," Mara said tersely. "Stand down, Maez."
"And we're just going to take your word for it? *Master* Skywalker? He's your nephew. You used to work for the Emperor. And you married a guy whose judgment nearly got all the Jedi killed! You'll forgive me if I don't show any respect."
"You'll forgive me if I don't," Mara's eyes darkened. "What brought on this sudden change of heart, Maez? Just a couple minutes ago, you were all for Anakin's new view of the Force."
"For someone who specialized in intelligence, you sure can't recognize a ruse," Maez huffed. "We needed time to switch out the power cells for our lightsabers. Something the rest of you still have yet to do."
"So you decided that I'm a Sith," Anakin's voice cut off the argument. "What are you going to do?"
Maez held out his hand, and his lightsaber flew into it. "What Jedi normally do to Sith when we find them. We cut them down."
The other Knights with Maez likewise freed their sabers.
"Vergere spoke to you, didn't she?" Alema spoke out suddenly, causing all eyes to go to her. Alema sauntered over to Maez and placed a hand on the hand gripping his lightsaber. "She spoke to you and told you that Anakin would become a Sith. Am I right?"
"Master Skywalker," Maez said stiffly. "Why don't you tell all of us here what your husband thinks of this schutta in front of me. Does he think she'll win the Best Jedi of the Year award any time soon?"
Mara clenched her jaw, but didn't answer.
"What's wrong? Didn't he tell you that he fully expected Alema to become a dark Jedi?" Maez said tauntingly. "Didn't he tell you to watch out for her? To be wary of her actions?"
"How do you know that?" Mara hissed. That had been a private conversation between her and Luke when they had been on their quarters in Mon Calamari. On the *Shadow*, she had only told the

apprentices Luke's vague opinion, so they couldn't have known the details of that private conversation.
"Luke Skywalker also told you to watch your nephew too, didn't he? That there was a darker taint about him that wasn't present before? The both of you knew that Anakin and Alema were a danger to the Order, but decided to keep it to yourselves. Let that danger fester! Alema killed all those scientists on that facility on Mon Cal! Anakin just roasted those creatures with his flame and lightning! You can't get any more dark than that."
Maez tried to activate his lightsaber, but the blade wouldn't form.
"Go back to sleep, Maez," Alema winked at him, both her hands still sandwiched around his sword-hand. "You really shouldn't believe everything a voice in your head tells you."
Maez's mouth moved several times, before his eyes rolled back up into his head and he dropped to the ground, unconscious.
Six other lightsabers activated.
"Nixa, Doreil, Ralan, Arvas, Trina, Vepar. Stand down, that's an order!" Mara snapped.
Several of them hesitated, blinking wildly as if trying to see through a haze. Trina and Doreil, however, immediately charged Alema.
The Twi'lek leaped out of their pincer-like charge and landed on the front steps of the pyramid. "Tahiri!" Alema called out, two Kaleesh blades flying into her hands. "Remind me to kill bird-beak someday. This is what happens when you give someone a nudge hard enough in the head that it sends them over the edge!"
"Alema?" Tahiri kept herself in front of Anakin. Whatever he had done had still left him drained, and though she could feel his desire to help, he didn't even have the strength to get up.
"This is the part where we say goodbye, Anakin. Thanks for everything, really." Alema smiled softly, her eyes glimmering with emotion. "You too, Jysella. You were the best little sis I never had."
"Alema, what are you…" Mara began, but stopped when Alema darted towards the two charging Knights with a wild grin on her face.
"Alema!" Jysella yelled, squeezing Mara's hand in her own.
Alema was a blur of motion as she once again tapped into her darker emotions. Her swords whistled and they slipped by the saber of the Verpine Jedi, Trina. Trina collapsed, head removed from his body, saber arm falling lifelessly to the ground. Before anyone could comprehend what was happening, Alema had swung her blades out to the other Knight; both digging into his mid-section and rending him in thirds when he tried to go for an overhand attack.

Ralan, Arvas, and Vepar all lost to whatever presence they had been fighting off and leaped into the battle in three sharp blurs. Their blue, green, and yellow blades sliced through the Kaleesh night, humming like a swarm of angry hornets. Alema artfully cartwheeled backwards, launching herself into a twisting spin as she deftly weaved around their attacks.

Despite the odds, one by one, the lightsaber blades were extinguished. Alema's Kaleesh blades batted aside Arvas' saber, and then sliced into him, dropping the Bothan Jedi Knight. She continued to back-pedal, and managed to lift Ralan with the Force. While Ralan struggled against her grip, Alema hurled one of her blades and impaled the knight clear in the chest. Alema recalled the blade as she warded off Vepar's attack, and a spray of blood drenched both opponents. Vepar managed to exchange a few more blows, but then slipped on the blood-slicken ground. Alema took advantage, and with an overhand strike, split his head in two.

The entire fight had been but a blur lasting only a few seconds. Unlike lightsabers, which cauterized wounds, the Kaleesh blades did no such thing. As the full moon peeked out from between heavy clouds, a hellish sight was revealed. In the beams of pale light, Alema stood amidst the five fallen corpses, blood pooling all around her feet and coating her leather outfit. Her arms were held out to the side, with a blood-soaked Kaleesh blade in each hand, and her face was cloaked in shadow. But as she turned towards the others, her eyes glowed eerily as it caught the light.

Silence fell and everyone warily stared at Alema's blood-drenched form.

Another second passed. The sabers of all the remaining Death Knights activated in unison.

Alema twirled her swords, she locked her face into a mask of forced cheer. "They had their heads scrambled. There was no fixing them unless the one who did the scrambling wanted them to be fixed. And there was no way that was going to happen. I had no choice."

"There's always a choice," Nixa hissed, his voice low. "You just proved everything the Skywalkers believed and expected of you."

"Fine, you got me, I'm a Sith," Alema shrugged, her demeanor changing in a heartbeat. She used the Force to disintegrate the blood on her clothing, and the remnants rose off in a cloud of black smoke. "Tell me, Nixa. Have you or any of your buddies ever faced a real Sith before? And not some shriveled up reject that had been trapped in a stasis field for Force knows how long. You saw how easily I took out

Trina and the others. How I dealt with that Sith that nearly killed three of you. Do you really think you can beat me?"
"We'll die trying if we have to."
"Oh? So you don't think you can win?" Alema looked over to a stupefied Tahiri and winked. "Then I have no reason to fight you."
"What do you me…" Nixa trailed off, an alarmed look settling across his features. He and the other Death Knights began to look around wildly, though Alema had yet to move from her location. "Where did she go!? Spread out! Find her!"
The Death Knights fanned out, forming a perimeter as they pushed into the nearby jungle. It was clear they couldn't see or sense where Alema was at all.
While Alema hid in their doubts, she almost contritely approached Anakin and Tahiri. "Can the two of you still see me?" She whispered softly. "Or did you give up on me too?"
"We can see you, Alema," Anakin replied quietly. Like Alema, his time on the asteroid had enabled him to sense mental tampering; and though the recent events shocked him, he had understood why Alema had had to act. Unfortunately, neither he nor Alema had any proof to back up an accusation against Vergere, and neither could do anything about the situation now that the die had been cast.
"You can?"
"Yeah," Tahiri nodded once, watching the Death Knights move further into the surrounding jungle. "You're not getting rid of us that easily."
"Jysella can see you too," Anakin motioned with his head.
Alema looked over her shoulder and saw the young human girl staring directly at her with a nonplussed expression on her face. The teenage Twi'lek couldn't help but breaking out into a relieved smile, winking at the young apprentice with a genuine, but nervous grin. Her heart only resumed its normal rhythm when Jysella made an abortive wave in Alema's direction, quickly averting her gaze when Mara bent down to ask what she was looking at.
"Astral way to find out who your friends really are," Anakin said with a faint smile. "Hiding in peoples' doubts."
Alema mimicked Anakin's expression. "That Sith Tahiri and I faced basically took my hiding in the Force one step further. It wasn't hard to imitate him."
"Yeah."
Alema swallowed and looked away. "I meant it though. I'm not coming back. The Jedi aren't for me. I have to find my own place in this messed up galaxy."

Rather than try and convince her otherwise, Anakin reached out to her with the Force to support her. "Be careful out there."
"You too," Alema said in a ghost of a whisper as she discarded her Kaleesh blades. She glanced guiltily at Tahiri, who sensed the Twi'lek's intentions and just motioned her consent. Giving the younger teen a grateful bow of her head, Alema turned and approached Anakin. She cupped his face and very gently kissed him. It wasn't anything like their previous kiss; filled with a desire to comfort and lustful need. This was more of a going away, thank you kiss; soft and full of more emotion than Alema normally felt safe to share.
"I swear I won't let either of you two down," Alema murmured as she stepped back. "No matter what. No matter where I end up. What I do will be for the two of you."
"And yourself," Anakin added.
Alema smirked whimsically. "Yeah. And myself too. While you two end this war, I'll do what I can to keep the balance in this galaxy"
"Goodbye, Alema," Tahiri whispered, embracing the older teen.
Alema hugged Tahiri tightly in return, hands gripping the back of her tunic. "Take care of him, please."
"I will," Tahiri blinked back tears.
"Tell Jysella to be good," Alema said weakly, her voice failing her as she waved at the young Jedi apprentice one last time. "And please. Look out for her too. I don't want to lose another sister."
"We will," Anakin nodded.
"I love you, both. So much," Alema whispered, closing her eyes. "Goodbye."
She seemed to shimmer into nothingness before their very eyes as she disappeared from their perceptions and became one with the night.
=}Chapter End{=
A\N: With this very important chapter, we begin winding down the Chiss arc, start the beginning of the end for the Remnant, part ways with Alema, and the troubles for Anakin only increase. Alema will not appear for the rest of the YV war, but she will factor into the sequel. Vergere just happens to be an amplifier of sorts that makes everything a lot bigger, or smaller, than things should be.
And on a side and relatively unimportant note...at 1000 plus pages single-spaced TNR font in MSWord, I've finished the story...=).

ADA 42

Forty-Two
=}I{= =}I{=

It was all Sannah could do to keep up with Dinua as they made their way over to the Death Watch base hidden in the debris of Raxis Prime. It was also all she could do to wonder why she was following this insane Mandalorian teen in the first place. Running towards a base with gun-turrets and full of people who were soldiers for a living, didn't exactly seem like the wisest or most appealing thing to do.
But then they ran into the first Death Watch patrol and Dinua reminded Sannah that an *Ori'ramikade,* or Mandalorian Supercommando, was more than a rank above the rest of the Mandalorians.
Dinua had seen the four-man patrol coming and had hit them side on. The bayonet at the end of her blaster carbine dispatched one with a clean jab to his throat. She pulled her carbine out and leveled two more with blaster fire at point-blank range; the energy literally lancing through their durasteel-armored bodies. Before any of the three bodies could hit the floor, Dinua pulled a combat knife out of the utility belt of her first victim and slung it at the fourth patrol member. This surviving Mandalorian caught the blade, but while he was distracted, Dinua had closed the distance and shoved the bayonet of her blaster into his chin. Blood trickled down over her gun, and with a single whine of her carbine, she gave the Death Watch Mandalorian a lethal dose of energy into the skull. Only then, did all four bodies hit the ground.
Dinua was quick in stripping the bodies of anything useful, creating a bandoleer of blaster packs and picking up two standard blaster pistols that looked to have come from an Imperial surplus sale.
"You want a knife or a blaster?" Dinua motioned to the array of weapons while fastening a mini-rocket launcher previously owned by the patrol's leader, to her wrist.
"I'm fine with the gun you gave me," Sannah said more than a little bewildered.
"Suit yourself."
And that had pretty much been the only words they exchanged en route to the Death Watch base. They stayed low, weaving in and out of the smallest of holes within the scrapyard. More than once, Sannah felt a protruding piece of debris tear her tunic. Finally, when the giant conveyor belt that carried scrap metal to be melted down was in sight, they stopped.
"Wha…"
"*K'uur!*" Dinua hissed in a low voice. She made herself prone and pulled out her carbine. With care, she scanned the area. *"T'ad, rayshe'a, she'cu…she'cu. Sannah, she'cu Kyr'tsad…"* Then, remembering that Sannah wasn't exactly fluent in Mando'a, switched

to Basic with a huff. "Nine Death Watch in the open. Aim for the one on the far right. He's the closest and you should be able to get him."
Sannah froze. Killing wild creatures and droids was one thing. But to actually take the life of another.
"Sannah?" Dinua glanced over her shoulder and saw the conflicted expression on her face. The Mandalorian teen let out a low breath, flicked the safety on her carbine, then pulled herself back down into cover. "Haven't taken a life yet?"
Sannah shook her head mutely, staring at her blaster.
"That's just great," Dinua leaned back against the debris bulk they were hiding behind.
"Well I'm sorry if I'm not as blood-thirsty as you are!" Sannah snapped, throwing the gun to the ground.
"Did Doran tell you of his first kill?" Dinua asked simply, no challenge or scorn in her voice.
Sannah shook her head again.
"You should really ask him about it. I took my first life when I was just thirteen. It was back on *Manda'yaim*, and I had just returned to my homestead after the day's schooling. My mom was off with *Mand'alor* and the other *Or'ramikade* on a mission. My father had died when I was younger," Dinua's voice trailed off, her face hidden behind her metal helmet. "I was home alone when a disgruntled merc whose group my mom destroyed during her bounty-hunting days, decided to pay me a visit. Just a *hut'uun* who was too weak to challenge my mom personally. He thought he'd kidnap me and send a holovid to my mom as an example. Fortunately my mom knew how dangerous her job was and had me carry a holdout blaster with me at all times. The *di'kut* never knew what killed him. One moment he's waving his vibroblade around, trying to intimidate what he thinks is a frightened thirteen year old school girl, and the next he's lying on the ground with a blaster mark on his forehead."
"What did it feel like?" Sannah whispered.
Dinua emitted a weak laugh. "I didn't really feel anything but relief at that moment. And then, when it actually sunk in that I had taken a life, I called my mom and had a nice long talk with her. She made it clear that I had done good. I had rid the galaxy of just one more scum who made it a darker place. Not sure I completely believed her, but it helped."
"Helped?"
"For the next time I killed," Dinua shrugged. "It wasn't any easier. My mother said it wasn't ever supposed to be. Kind of like you *Jetii* and the *dar'Jetii.* 'When killing becomes easy,' my mother told me, 'that's when

you hang up your guns and retire. Until then, just know that with every life you take, that's one that won't hurt you or your friends.'"
"Is '*dar'Jetii'* anything like *'dar'manda'?*" Sannah said softly, looking down at her feet as she hugged her legs.
"Not at all," Dinua shook her head once. "In your language, a *dar'Jetii* would be a Sith. A *dar'manda* is something else entirely. It is a Mandalorian who has lost their identity, their soul, their sense of honor. They are no longer Mandalorian in name or action; whereas a Sith can still be called a 'dark Jedi'. I call you *dar'manda* because, like those Mandalorians who have lost their sense of identity, you too have no identity when you no longer have the Force to fallback upon. I understand and respect your desire to preserve all life, but that can only get you so far in a war. *Mand'alor* tells all of his new recruits this one thing which I have taken to heart, that 'laws exist not for the just, but for the unjust, for the just carry the law in their hearts and do not need to call it from afar'. Evil is through intent. Jedi and Mandalorian kill to keep this galaxy in balance, to ensure that evil does not overwhelm it. We are the reason civilization exists because we excise those who wish to do it harm. When you take a life, take comfort that you will be saving many more."
"I know," Sannah breathed, still staring at the blaster she had discarded. "But still…"
"Think about my mom's words, Sannah," Dinua's voice took on an uncharacteristically gentle tone. "Say you decide not to kill that man I pointed out for you. And say the *Kyr'tsad* decide to launch a raid on the camp tomorrow. Would you ever forgive yourself if that one man you spared went on to kill my brother and sister Mandalorians? Would you ever forgive yourself if that man got off a lucky shot that killed Doran?"
Sannah blanched at that thought and nearly reached for the gun, but then quickly withdrew her hand again. "Dinua. I'm *not* like you. I just can't aim and shoot and arbitrarily end someone's life just because I have the power to. Even if it is for justice or whatever other reason. I'm a Jedi, not a Mandalorian Supercommando. We may both want to uphold justice, but we have very different ways of going about it."
Dinua regarded Sannah evenly, then inclined her head. "Fine. Stay here then, *dar'manda.* I shall take the base myself."
"Dinua!"
"Go ahead and hold on to your morals and platitudes. Without the Force, that is all you have left," Dinua picked up the blaster Sannah had discarded and exchanged it for one of the ones she had taken off the dead Mandalorian patrollers. She then detached the comlink she had strapped to her wrist and tossed it at Sannah's feet. "While you're

at it, talk to Doran and find out about his first kill. Find out what he'll think about your cowardice. If I die, I expect you to inform the rest of the Mandalorians about the location of this base. They have my transponder signal frequency."
"Dinua!"
But the Mandalorian teen had already rose from her cover and once again steadied her blaster carbine. Five shots from five different locations later, and five of the guards lay on the ground dead. The rest had retreated into the base while the converted fighter-cockpits whirled around in search of the sniper.
Sannah squeezed the comlink in her hand and covered her ears, still curled up in a ball. Unwanted memories from Bakura replayed through her mind, the sight of Zel, hearing those protesters being gunned down. Feeling their deaths, however insignificant in the Force they were, as they breathed their last. Flashes of red and green. The smell of burning flesh. She couldn't get over the lifeless expressions on their faces.
Dinua's carbine sounded again.
Sannah whimpered and activated the comlink. "Hey Doran. I don't know where you are, but I could really use one of your crazy pep-talks right now."
"Sannah?" Just hearing his voice caused the young Melodie teen to relax a little. "*Sannah, what's wrong? You're blocking me out."*
"Oh, sorry. Dinua wanted me to go without using the Force. I should probably…"
"No. If you're not using the Force. Don't fall back on it just because things got tough," Doran said, surprising Sannah completely.
"Doran?"
"Let me guess. She's been calling you dar'manda and has more or less been a pain in the ass?"
"And she's assaulting a Death Watch base all by herself," Sannah whispered, flinching at the sound of an explosion in the background.
"We're dealing with a Kyr'tsad assault as we speak," Doran replied glibly.
"Nice shot, Doran! You nailed that guy right in his visor! That'll ruin his day!" A Mandalorian's voice could be heard in the background.
"Oh," Sannah swallowed, her heart sinking. "Doran…I've never killed anyone."
"I know. It's also why mom approved of Dinua training you," Doran somehow managed to sound calm and reassuring even as a volley of blaster fire echoed over the comm. *"Dinua tell you why she called you dar'manda?"*

"Yeah. She says I don't have an identity if I don't have the Force. But she's wrong. I'm still a Jedi. I won't kill *because* I am a Jedi. Even without the Force."
"*There's another reason why she calls you by that name. Dar'manda isn't used to describe just anyone without an identity. It's used solely for Mandalorians. She calls you dar'manda is because she sees in you what I see. A strong warrior who is willing to stand by her beliefs no matter what. You don't want to kill. That's perfectly fine. There's a reason why most guns have a 'stun' setting. Well, non-Mandalorian guns anyway."*
"She…she told me to ask about your first kill," Sannah swallowed. "I mean, I know now's probably a very bad time to go into storytelling, but…"
"*My first kill was when I was nine,"* Doran said without hesitation. "*I was on a mission with mom. I think I told you about our adventure on Velabri, right? They were the guys with white eyes and spiky silver hair."*
"You were helping the local law enforcement track down a group of criminals trading ancient Jedi artifacts," Sannah recalled.
"Yeah. The version I told you, where we caught up with those criminals and helped the Velabrian authorities lock them away wasn't the complete truth. During the chase, we ended up in a warehouse on the planet. Several of the criminals decided that fighting the authorities was a smart thing to do and open fired on us. One of their shots hit mom, and a second would have hit me but mom took that one too. Mom collapsed and her blaster fell out of her hand. After I got over the shock, I got angry. Really angry. I thought they had just killed my mom, and I wanted to get even. More security forces showed up and the bad guys were finally beginning to surrender. I got out of my cover and shot the first smuggler I saw. It had been a human who had his weapon on the ground in front of him and his hands raised in the air. I still remember his face, the look of complete shock, <u>my</u> expression of complete shock. I had been hiding behind a mirror unit and remembered just staring at him, and then at myself, back and forth. When what I did finally caught up to me, the blaster clattered out of my hand like it was on fire. If anything, I actually think it's better if you don't kill. It really does suck for both the guy that dies and your own sanity."
"I can see what it did to yours," Sannah quipped weakly.
"Don't worry about not being able to kill, Fish-Girl," Doran said. *"It just isn't your thing. So what? Dinua has a tough-love, tough-luck attitude*

to life. You're not her. Just do what you normally do and help save the day."
"But she took the blast…" Sannah trailed off and stared at the standard DH-17 blaster pistol that Dinua had left behind. "Never mind."
"Sannah?"
"You just stay alive, Adventure-Boy," Sannah said, picking the blaster up. She noticed that, unlike Dinua's newer Mandalorian WESTAR blaster, this older gun had a stun setting. As she flicked the switch to make the energy charges non-lethal, she wondered if Dinua had deliberately left it behind. Once again her opinion of the older teen increased considerably. There was obviously much more to Dinua than meets the eye. "I have to go save your not-quite-girlfriend-more-than-best-friend."
"You stay alive too, Fish-Girl," Doran chuckled. *"And remember, no Force!"*
"I know! I am *so* kicking your butt when I get back," Sannah snapped with a smile. She knew what she had to do now and was confident that she was making the right choice. She looked over the barrier she had been behind and saw that Dinua had left quite a mess. The modified TIE cockpits had all been destroyed, bodies littered the front of the hidden base. "By the way, you never mentioned how scary good Dinua was. She's like a one-man army."
"*All Ori'ramikade are*," Doran said. *"We just finished the battle on our end. More like a slaughter."*
Sannah climbed over the last of the scrap and emerged out in front of the base's entrance. "All right. I'll report back if I need help, Sannah out."
It was too quiet inside the base. Sannah heard neither explosion nor blaster fire, or any sign that Dinua was continuing her streak of chaos. She crept forward, following the path of dead bodies. Dinua had definitely made progress.
As she got deeper into the makeshift base, Sannah finally heard voices echoing from somewhere below. She made it to the end of the path and peered over the railing of the rusted, metal walkway. The area below was composed of raised platforms at various levels, overseeing a molten vat of melted scrap metal. Newer looking, open-air pre-fab units stood out in the dingy brownness of the surrounding debris. Dinua was in one of them, strapped to a table of some sort and stripped of her armor. She appeared to be unconscious, and had a bloody gash on the side of her head. In a lower platform in front of Dinua's shelter, five others in Mandalorian armor were conversing with a hologram of another Mandalorian.

"The attack on the training camp failed," one of the warriors remarked. "Those who survived are falling back now."
"*Idiots. I told you not to attack until we were ready! We needed a position of power, not one of weakness!"*
"We couldn't help it. Trasde got a little *haryc b'aalyc* and tried to attack that Jedi brat that recently arrived. Once his cover was blown, we had no choice."
"*Then perhaps you can explain it to the Yuuzhan Vong commander when he arrives at Raxis Prime,"* the terse female voice on the other end of the line said darkly. "*I've heard that they have very little tolerance for failure."*
"We still managed to capture one of Boba Fett's *Or'ramikade.*"
"*Oh?"*
"The info we have on this one says that she's close to the Jedi that landed. We can use her as bait to lure him in. I'm sure the Yuuzhan Vong commander would appreciate having a live, Jedi specimen to work with."
"That just might save your lives. How many men do you have left?"
There was a small silence. "We have enough to complete our objectives, Lady Vizsla."
"*How many?*"
"The *Or'ramikade* killed most of our brothers and sisters attacking this outpost. Between us and the survivors of the attack on the camp, in total, the *Kyr'tsad* has only eleven left on Raxis Prime."
"Eleven? I spent the better part of the last two years building up the force of our brethren on Raxis Prime. I sent fifty of you in, and you mean to tell me that not even a third of you are left?"
"We can still kill Boba Fett, Lady Vizsla."
"Forget it! I am coming with the rest of Kyr'tsad to fix this carbon flush before the Vong arrive. You are to stay put and interrogate the Or'ramikade you captured. See if she knows anything useful. But you are to do nothing else, is that clear?"
"Yes ma'am."
"*Verde Vizsla out."*
The hologram died, and the five Mandalorians glanced back towards Dinua's immobile and unconscious form.
"I can't believe we have to keep her alive."
"Only until that Jedi kid gets here. You heard Jintar talk the other day, the two had a thing for each other. Can't say I blame the boy."
The five separated, with two going over to Dinua's table, and the others going about various activities.

Sannah saw a drainage pipe further down the way, and silently swung herself over the railing. She edged along the upper platform, all the while keeping an eye on the activities below to see if she had been spotted. The Melodie Jedi reached the drainage pipe, slid down it, and plopped quietly behind several supply crates.
One of the five Mandalorians was taking inventory from a heavy-looking metal chair; occasionally looking up to scan the supplies and inputting data into a datapad. Sannah waited until his back was turned before she darted out of her cover and pressed the tip of her blaster against the man's back. The Mandalorian had no time to sound an alarm before Sannah's stun blast dropped him to the ground. Unlike a lethal blaster shot, the stun blast was relatively silent, and Sannah's attack went unnoticed by the others.
The Melodie Jedi quickly dragged the Mandalorian behind the supply crates and used the binders he had in his utility belt on his wrists. She took off his helmet and stripped him of his weapons, turned his socks into a makeshift gag, before stuffing him into a crate full of military rations and closing the lid.
"Jak, you there?" Another voice called out.
Sannah ducked behind the crate, and another Mandalorian entered.
"Jak, the commander wants the truth serums. Where'd you put them?"
The Mandalorian wasn't wearing his helmet and was wiping his brow as he looked about the pre-fab room. "Jak?"
Sannah waited silently, holding her breath as she heard the Mandalorian's footsteps get closer. As the Mandalorian began to peer around the corner, Sannah's open palm lashed out into his face. The stunned Mandalorian staggered backwards, reflexively gripping his now broken nose.
"Dat waz a miztake liddle girl," the Mandalorian growled, blood dripping from his nose as he dropped into a fighting stance.
Sannah brought her blaster up, but the man kicked it out of her hand.
"Nod zo tough, are you?"
Sannah replied by mimicking his stance.
"Oh, you're one of Boba's newer recruits den. I guess I shuddn't be surprise he'z allowing babies du try out for hiz *Or'ramikade*," the Mandalorian said patronizingly. "Come on, liddle girl. Let's see what you got."
"You first," Sannah motioned.
The larger fighter moved in with a high-to-low chop of his leg. Sannah whirled to the side, and the man's armored foot dented the supply crate behind her. He tried a spinning roundhouse punch, but Sannah again avoided it, knowing that one blow from him was enough to end

the fight. His next punch broke through the flimsy metal wall. A kick snapped the desk in the room in two. Sannah continued to dance around him, finding that she could read his movements even without the Force.
The lessons Dinua had taught her were definitely coming in handy as she watched the man's weight shift from one foot to the next, saw the slight tic before his hands swung out. When the Mandalorian's next punch caused his fist to get stuck in a supply crate, Sannah gripped the nearby metal chair and brought it down over his head. The Mandalorian staggered, and Sannah hit him a second time. This time the Mandalorian dropped to the ground unconscious.
Finding herself barely winded by her exertions, Sannah repeated the same actions as she had done with 'Jak,' and bound the new arrival with his own gear. She found another supply crate large enough, and dumped him into it.
Two down, three to go.
She peaked out of the room. The other three were in her line of sight, none looking her way. One was with Dinua, Sannah quickly concluded that she had just taken out his partner. One was sitting in front of the bank of communications equipment. And the last of the three had removed his helmet to get a bite to eat. Unfortunately, all three were in visual range of each other and attacking one would likely alert the other two.
She quickly put together a plan. Sannah crept along the outside of the platform and got a better angle of Dinua's location. Sannah changed the setting on her blaster and aimed it at the Mandalorian teen's bound form. Normally she would have liked to use the Force to assure herself of her aim, but Dinua's shooting lessons filled in that gap. Taking great care to steady her weapon, the Melodie Jedi squeezed off two shots in quick succession. The blaster noise instantly alerted the three Mandalorians.
Sannah switched her gun back to stun and fired at the Mandalorian in the communication's hub. He ducked, and the paralyzing crackle of energy fizzed out against the terminal. In the meantime, the other two Mandalorians took aim with their sidearms and began firing on her. Unlike her non-killing stance, they had no qualms about blasting her to oblivion.
Sannah sprinted zigzag through the hail of plasma and laser projectiles and dove into the communication's hub back first, firing a wild array of stun bursts in the process like a holovid action star. The Mandalorian within the room looked at her in surprise, and she nailed him with another stun shot.

The blaster fire from the outside began to intensify as the two other Mandalorians covered each other and approached.
A third blaster shrieked twice, and everything went silent.
"Not bad, for a *dar'manda*," Dinua called out over the sudden stillness.
Sannah peaked out over her cover and saw the Mandalorian teen casually holding a smoking blaster pistol in her hand. The other two Mandalorians were on the ground with neat circles burned in the backs of their helmets.
"*Nayc, nu'ni cuyi dar'manda. Ni cuyi Jetii.*" Sannah replied with a smirk, meeting Dinua's eyes and tilting her head up in challenge. *No, I'm not a dar'manda. I am a Jedi.*
"*Jate*," Dinua remarked with a nod of approval. She held up her other wrist, which contained a slight burn from where Sannah had shot away the metal cuff binding her. "Not a bad shot, Jedi."
"I had a good teacher," Sannah said, she held out her blaster. "Do you want the gun back?"
"Keep it. If what I heard is true, then this isn't over yet." Dinua walked over to the communication's hub. She changed the frequency and activated it. In a second, the hologram of Boba Fett emerged. Dinua clapped a fist to her chest and bowed her head.
"Mand'alor, Jetti Sannah bal ni tome ru'parji shal te Kyr'tsad. Gar ke'gyce?" Dinua reported, requesting further orders.
Boba Fett replied in Basic. *"We have your transponder signal and are nearing your location. Secure the area and make way for my arrival."*
"*Mand'alor*. There is a new Vizsla in charge and she is coming ahead of a Yuuzhan Vong task force."
"Perfect opportunity to see what you Supercommandos can do, don't you think?"
"Yes, sir."
"We can discuss the details later. Jedi Sarkin-Tainer has finalized plans for your team's assault on Bandomeer. Now that the Vong know we're not friends, it'll be a whole lot easier. Just sit tight for now."
"Understood."
"*Mandalore out."*
=}II{= =}II{=
On the outside, Jag was calm and collected, an unfeeling, efficient military officer of the Chiss Ascendancy. Inside, however, he was seething. Traitors on the Chiss stronghold planet of Naporar had gotten his wingman killed, had caused the lives of so many Chiss. Even after his attempt to unite the fractured Ascendancy, the knowledge that some Chiss still wanted Csilla to burn aggravated him to the extreme. It was hard to believe that it had only been two days since he, Jaina,

and Shawnkyr had returned to Chiss space. Hard to believe that so much had changed since then.
The yet-to-be-healed blaster wounds he had suffered during Chief Navigator Aabe's attempted assassination still pained him. He had more or less ignored it during the dogfights, but adrenaline could only take him so far. The bacta patch slapped onto his shoulder was completely soaked red with his blood beneath his flightsuit, and the steady burning coming from the wound intensified with every movement of his arm. But it would have to wait. There were more important things to focus on than a minor injury. Namely, investigating who in Naporar Control was to blame for the deaths of Shawnkyr and so many others.
"The commander of Naporar Control is one Commander Ina'ganet'nuruodo. She goes by her core name," Chiss Commander Hess'irolia'nuruodo, head of what was left of the Household Phalanx, briefed him as their shuttle descended through Naporar's atmosphere. "She is a veteran of the armed forces, has led two Colonial Phalanx militias, has been commended for repulsion of a Vagaari attack at Chaf, and is well connected politically. She is due to be rotated to an assignment on Csilla next cycle."
"Do we know what assignment?"
"Your father's personal guard," Irolia replied succinctly.
"And has she given a reason as to why Naporar Control disseminated false information to the Expansionary Defense Fleet?"
"At last communiqué, she was still looking into it."
"Jaina, when we meet with her, signal me if you detect she is hiding something," Jag said, looking over his shoulder at one of the passengers in the shuttle.
"I will," Jaina nodded.
"Too many Chiss have lost their lives today," Jag said slowly. "We *will* find answers."
The other occupants of the shuttle were a Chiss strike team wearing uniforms of burgundy and black. They were all Irolia's people, hand-picked by her and Soontir Fel. Escorting the shuttle was what was left of force Spike, their damaged and smoking fighters still covering their force leader even after the battle had been finished.
The shuttle touched down and was met by an honor guard of Chiss soldiers from the Naporar garrison. The base commander, Ina'ganet'nuruodo, strode out to meet Jag and the others with a sharp salute.
"Colonel Fel, Commander Irolia."
"Commander Ganet," Jag said coolly.

Gannet lowered her arm. "It was my understanding that your father would be the one conducting the investigation."
"The Assistant Syndic has more pressing concerns at the moment," Jag replied. "My people will be relieving your garrison of their weapons and confining them to their quarters until the traitor has been identified. I trust you will not have a problem with this?"
"Sir, that's hardly necessary and…"
"Excellent, I'm glad you agree that this is the best course of action," Jag said in clipped tones. "Commander Irolia, have your men relieve Commander Ganet's people of their arms and confine them to quarters. The Galactic Alliance ambassador and myself will work with Commander Ganet to get to the bottom of this."
"Sir," Commander Irolia snapped off her own salute, then motioned to her men. They promptly surrounded the honor guard, disarmed them, then marched them back towards the barracks at gunpoint.
"It would not have been necessary had you discovered how the Yuuzhan Vong compromised the control room," Jag clasped his hands at the small of his back. He saw Jaina's brief nod and proceeded with Plan B. If Ganet was compromised, he needed to see just how far the Chiss had gone. Now was the time to employ some of the sneakiness he had learned from Wedge and the other side of his family line. "Now, tell me what you *have* uncovered or I will place you under arrest for gross incompetence."
"Sir, all I can tell you is what I already forwarded to you in my report; that any communication between the fleet and Naporar control were somehow routed through a tertiary transmission tower before reaching the control room. We have sent engineers to investigate, but they have found only a standard splice in the transmission lines. Anyone could have done it."
Jag raised a single eyebrow. "Commander Ganet, this has been a stressful time for me and I have just remembered to introduce my companion. This is Jaina Solo. She is a Jedi Knight."
Ganet's red eyes darted sharply to Jaina, alarm registering on her face. "A Jedi? Here?"
Jaina kept her own features expressionless as she coolly inclined her head in greeting.
"As you know, Jedi are well versed at sensing deception, Yuuzhan Vong, and other forms of treachery," Jag embellished slightly. "They are especially known for their ability to read the minds of most species, Chiss included."
"Of…of course," Ganet's smile was more than forced now as Jaina held her gaze.

"Now that that pleasantry is taken care of, please continue with your briefing," Jag said, his good-nature just as false as Ganet's smile.
"Right. I…I had a report ready for your father," Ganet pulled out a datapad. "It details everything we have done since your fleet arrived. The moment we realized you were not receiving our messages, we began an instant search of the communications equipment. That is how we traced the signals coming from the tertiary transmission tower."
"So you say," Jag said. He tapped his own comlink. "Wyn, have you managed to isolate the records for the comm-traffic on Naporar yet?"
"Yes. James said there was much more traffic than necessary."
"I am sending you the records compiled by Commander Ganet, head of Naporar Control." Jag pressed a few buttons on the datapad.
"Got it. Cross referencing and tracing any non-official chatter. Eliminating emergency beacons. Since this signal wasn't detected until later, we're also eliminating non-Chiss frequencies. Non-Chiss frequencies would have been picked up immediately during a combat situation."
Jag saw Ganet take an involuntary step back. "In case you are wondering, Commander Ganet. My own team of tech experts landed at the tower you had indicated in your report and concluded that the splice was a plant to throw off any investigation. At the moment they are in the Naporar Control room with Commander Irolia finishing their investigations."
"We've narrowed down the console where fleet transmissions were being routed too. All we have to do is find out who was using it. Once we sift through the security cameras, it should be simple enough."
A tic formed on Ganet's forehead, and the Chiss pulled out a small device. "You were foolish to place your sister in such a vulnerable area, Colonel. Accidents happen on the frontlines after all."
She pressed a button, and a rumbling explosion echoed above them, right where the control room was.
Rather than be distressed about Wyn's death, Jag only looked bored. He looked to Jaina with a shake of his head. "I apologize for bringing you here, Jaina. I underestimated the intelligence of the traitor."
"She expected you to die in orbit, not a full investigation," Jaina shrugged. "She did do her best in the time she had."
A hold-out blaster dropped down into Ganet's hand. The commander raised it towards Jag, but the weapon flew out of her hand with a gesture from Jaina. Jaina threw the blaster aside, took two steps forward, and promptly dropped the Chiss commander with a vicious right hook to the head.

"Jag?" Wyn's voice sounded fearful.
"I'm okay, Wyn," Jag remarked wearily. He inclined his head gratefully when Jaina helped keep him on his feet. "Is Csilla still secure?"
"It is. We're receiving the first ship-loads of wounded and damaged ships now. Cem and James are coordinating with High Command to help provide aid for the exiled house members as well."
"We will be returning shortly," Jag said. "And that was very good acting, Wyn."
"I take after mom after all, Jagged." Wyn said with mock superiority in her voice.
"And a little after father too," Jag replied dryly.
"Jaina, keep looking out for him. Please," Wyn said over his comm.
Jaina smiled softly at Jag and touched the reply button. "Sure thing Wyn."
Jag ended the communications and rubbed at his face tiredly. "Do you sense any Yuuzhan Vong on this base? We can contact Lando and have him supply some of his Vong detector mouse-bots later."
Jaina closed her eyes, and for a moment, became as still as a statue. Jag looked on, leaning against a near wall for support. Even if she was sweaty, her face covered in grime and soot, and her hair in disarray, Jaina still managed to look beautiful in her flight suit. Or maybe he was just partial to sexy female Jedi pilots who could *almost* out-fly him.
He would never be able to understand the Force or see the universe as she did. And for the most part, didn't want to. He had gotten along fine without the Force so far. Like sight to someone born blind, it wasn't like he needed the Force to live. During his more irrational moments of frustration and self-pity, he did become jealous of the Force bonds Jaina appeared to have with some of the other Jedi. They would know her in a way he would never be able to. But that was when he was feeling irrational and frustrated with the galaxy in general. If those Force bonds helped keep Jaina safe and happy, he was all for it. He would just have to make his own bonds with her, ensure that she knew how important she was to him. Even more so now that the war had so kindly reminded him that it was capable of taking even those he was close to. Of course, it would be much harder to do after these recent events.
Though Baron Soontir's voice had helped to unite the Ascendancy forces, Jag had learned through Commander Irolia that his father was still in a bacta tank on Csilla. The injuries Soontir had sustained were serious enough that the Baron would most likely be forced to step down in the near future. This left Jag, as the sole, known, male offspring of the Fel line in the role of Soontir's successor, whether he

wanted it or not. And in a highly family-based society such as the Chiss, having an heir fit to inherit a position was a sign of the family's power and capabilities. The actual fighting may have been nearing an end, but the turmoil of the 'disagreement' within the Ascendancy was far from over. Soontir's departure would definitely leave a power vacuum. A vacuum Jag knew he would be forced to step into if he wanted to ensure that Shawnkyr's and Chak's sacrifices were not in vain. Enough Ruling Families had already been dismantled. With the Nuruodo family acting as one of the few stable pillars of support for the Ascendancy, its strength needed to be assured lest the Ascendancy truly collapse. On top of everything, he had made that promise to Shawnkyr, to return and do his duty should she ever die. There was only one option, and it saw him staying in Chiss space for quite a while.
"Thinking deep thoughts?"
Jag offered Jaina an impartial shrug. "No Yuuzhan Vong?"
"None that I could sense," Jaina replied. She gently pressed her hand to his wounded shoulder. "You should get this looked at."
"There'll be time later," Jag replied.
"There's time now," Jaina said, not relenting. "I promised Wyn I'd look out for you."
Jag raised an eyebrow. The downside, or plus side depending on how one saw it, of the both of them being stubborn and hating to lose, meant that even the smallest things often led to heated arguments… and equally heated moments where they made up. "The injury is not fatal. Leave the medical supplies to the Chiss who truly need them."
"Jag, Jag, Jag," Jaina chided with a small smile. "Have you forgotten that your girlfriend is a Jedi Knight and a Goddess?" Jag blinked and glanced down to his shoulder when the pain began to recede. Jaina cupped his cheek with her other hand to redirect his attention to her soft brown eyes. "You need to take care of yourself too, Colonel Fel. An exhausted pilot is one who gets himself killed. You can't help the Ascendancy if you die of blood loss."
"I shall blame the blood loss for my poor judgment," Jag said smoothly, testing his arm's range. It still twinged, but he could feel that it had mostly been healed. "That is what I have you around for anyways."
"Please, if you use *my* judgment, you'd probably have gotten the both of us killed a long time ago," Jaina leaned in for a kiss.
The unconscious Chiss on the ground began to groan as consciousness returned to her. Jaina shot the traitor a dirty look and planted her boot onto the woman's face, hard enough to knock her out again. Jag knew that if there was one thing Jaina hated more than losing friends in a war, it was losing friends in a war because someone betrayed them.

She may not have been the closest to Shawnkyr or Chak, but she was incensed at the needless way they had died. "We should have Irolia send a couple of people to pick her up. I've skimmed her mind and she had a couple of accomplices I can help point out later."
The message was sent.
Jag glanced back at the woman he loved, taking a deep breath to steel himself. Jaina, sensing that he had something important to say, remained quiet.
"I will be staying with the Ascendancy once the affairs on Naporar are settled," Jag said shortly.
"Duty?" Jaina said, there was a note of sadness to her voice, but also of understanding. They were both military people and knew what was expected of them.
"Duty," Jag nodded. "I will have to help my father stabilize the Ascendancy. Between the members of the exiled families and the poor condition of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Fleet, the Chiss will be exceedingly vulnerable in the near future. I cannot leave it in its current state."
"I understand."
"I apologize, Jaina," Jag said stiffly. "The Ascendancy will most likely remain isolated for the duration of this war. We scarcely have enough ships to protect our own borders, much less help the Galactic Alliance."
"It's nothing to apologize for, Jag," Jaina whispered, smiling whimsically. She too had her duty; to take the information about Zonama Sekot back to the Galactic Alliance in hopes of ending the war. "This war allowed us to meet in the first place. It only makes sense that it's also the reason why we have to part."
"For now." Jag exhaled, not once looking away from her. He willed her to understand that this wasn't his choice. That if he could have it his way, he'd follow her back, and damn the consequences. But they both had responsibilities, burdens placed on them by so many others. They had been blessed with the small amount of time they had been given. It was more than most people had. But now, now they had to return their full attention to the demands of the galaxy. "Good luck on your quest to find Zonama Sekot. The faster the war is over…"
"The sooner we can see each other again," Jaina finished, plucking the unspoken words from his mind.
They kissed a long, bittersweet kiss. Embracing fiercely, trying to burn the image, the feel, of the other into their minds. Who knew how long it would be until they saw each other again.
If they saw each other again.

Very slowly they parted, both of their faces soft for a fraction of a second before their emotional defenses rose. They were now just Jedi and soldier, with duty their only focus.
"I will have Commander Irolia's forces escort you back to Galactic Alliance space when this is over," Jag said dutifully.
"Thank you, Colonel," Jaina remarked, as Commander Irolia and her people entered to apprehend Ganet. "I'll help your people identify the other traitors as quickly as possible. I know that events on Csilla will be demanding your attention."
"That is appreciated." Jag inclined his head. "Commander Irolia?"
"Sir?"
"Ambassador Jedi Solo will help you apprehend the remaining culprits guilty of treason against the Ascendancy. Afterwards, you are to ensure that she reaches Galactic Alliance space unharmed."
"Yes, sir," Irolia saluted. She rotated to Jaina. "Well then, Jedi Solo, shall we, I believe the phrase your people would use would be; 'clean house'?"
"Yes," Jaina locked eyes with Jag one last time. "Let's."
And with that, Jagged Fel and Jaina Solo parted ways.
=}III{= =}III{=
Despite her new found confidence, Sannah couldn't help but feel intimidated at the sight of seventy plus Mandalorians in full battle armor, marching into the now defunct *Kyr'tsad* outpost. At the head of the formation was Boba Fett himself, along with Tyria Sarkin-Tainer. She didn't see Doran anywhere though.
"Dinua, you did well," Boba acknowledged. "You too, Melodie."
"Thank you, sir." Both Dinua and Sannah said, standing at attention.
"Now that we know the *Kyr'tsad* are coming to Raxis Prime, we can prepare a nice little reception for them," Boba continued. The Mandalorians he brought with him were busy laying traps, auto-turrets, and various other nasties. "This should make them think twice about ever reforming."
Sannah glanced at a silent Tyria with wide, questioning eyes. Just the carnage left by Dinua had been terrible. The war was supposed to be against the Yuuzhan Vong, not against each other. As she mutely followed behind Boba and Dinua, who were discussing upcoming battle plans, she waited for Tyria to do the Jedi thing and object against another mass slaughter. After several long seconds passed she realized that no objection was coming.
"Isn't there another way?" Sannah spoke up loudly and clearly.
Boba, Dinua, and about two dozen other Mandalorians nearby stopped to look at her.

"Melodie?" Boba turned his full attention to her.
"Isn't there another way?" Sannah repeated, not at all cowed by the number of eyes now on her. She drew herself up to her fullest height, which still barely reached Boba Fett's shoulders. "You are all Mandalorians. The *Kyr'tsad* are also Mandalorians. We're fighting a war to save this galaxy, but all you're doing is fighting amongst each other!"
"The *Kyr'tsad* wear the armor of a Mandalorian, nothing more," Boba said calmly. "Being a Mandalorian means more than wearing the armor."
"The *Resol'nare.* I know," Sannah nodded, referring to the Mandalorian code Dinua had taught her during their two weeks of training. "But do the *Kyr'tsad* not follow it as well? They serve their own clan. They are your brothers and sisters in everything but ideology. They care as much about *Manda'yaim* as you do, only in a different way. Do you really think they would just stand by and watch their home planet be turned into something like Coruscant or Nal Hutta?"
"The *Kyr'tsad* have been separate from the Mandalorians for nearly three generations. They've had their chances, and every time, they've spat at our faces!" Objected a Mandalorian from behind Sannah.
"They've killed countless people in their misguided quest, they have no honor!" Another called out.
"The *Kyr'tsad* are nothing but ill-trained mercenaries now, we don't need them!" A third protested.
"And what are you all?" Sannah shot back, turning to stare at each Mandalorian objector. "Bullies with fancy armor and weapons? You are *Ori'ramikade*, the arm of *Mand'alor* himself. You are supposed to take whatever action that betters not only *Manda'yaim*, but the galaxy as a whole. How will massacring your brothers and sisters help any of us? At best, all it will do is prove that *Mand'alor*'s elite is capable of taking out a group of ill-trained mercenaries. At worse, it will show that *Mand'alor's* elite is extremely short sighted and knows only how to solve problems with their blasters. The *Kyr'tsad* reunifying with the rest of the Mandalorians can only have positive consequences. So what if they have a difference of opinion? It will at least keep your minds sharp and cause you to look at this galaxy differently. We need allies in this war, not more enemies. Do what you have to, but as a Jedi, I'm more than willing to help negotiate a truce between the two sides."
Sannah ended her rant, panting hotly as she turned back to Boba. At his side, Dinua was nearly expressionless, a simple raised eyebrow showing whatever surprise she must have been feeling. Tyria was

likewise almost impassive, the corners of her lips were twitching as she fought a smile of approval.
Boba glanced over to Tyria in what could only be resignation as he shook his head. "Jedi."
"That's us," Tyria said, inclining her head at Sannah with pride.
Boba returned his helmeted gaze at Sannah, which caused the Melodie teen to gulp bravely. "Very well, Melodie. I'll contact the *Kyr'tsad* leader and see if she is interested in…negotiations."
Sannah's stomach did a little victory swooping. "Thank you, *Mand'alor.*"
"We'll see if you can follow through on that promise of yours. Negotiating a truce after nearly a century of animosity will not be easy."
"We're Jedi," Sannah echoed Tyria's statement. "If we wanted easy, we'd stick to floating rocks with our minds."
Boba chuckled and patted Sannah on her shoulder. "If only all Jedi were as stubborn and smart as you."
He bypassed a stunned Sannah and made his was over to the communication's hub. Sannah, in the meantime, still remained stunned by the praise she had just received from one of the most infamous men in the galaxy.
"Come on, *Jetii*," Dinua smirked, guiding Sannah after Boba. "This is your show after all. *Mand'alor* will need that expert negotiating skills all you Jedi seem to be born with."
Sannah blinked, then, as if realizing what she had just done, cast a panicked look towards Tyria. The older Jedi, however, merely smiled in support and remained where she was, leaning against the back wall. Seeing the confidence Tyria had in her caused Sannah to swallow and nod her head determinedly. A lot was riding on this, but as she had proven to Dinua and to herself, she was a Jedi. And Jedi didn't do easy.
=}IV{= =}IV{=
For once, angering a Yuuzhan Vong didn't immediately result in a pitch battle. To the confusion of everyone in the capital building of Yaga Minor, even Torkal Vorrik appeared surprised by the information that had just been revealed.
"B'Shith would not have been this sloppy," Torkal immediately objected. "He would not make a promise to one, and a contradictory promise to another."
"The audio files…" Kyp began.
"Must have been doctored," Torkal growled, pounding a fist on the table. "Do you think Domain Vorrik foolish enough to try to provoke a war with this Empire when we do not even have the ships or the supply lines to take it by force?"

"No, we don't," Leia said before Kyp or any of his Dozen could respond. "We were simply relaying the information that was passed on to us."
"I knew that Moff Rosset was ambitious," Moff Flennic said contemplatively. "But he must truly be an idiot if he thinks the Empire will follow him."
"My brother and several others are on their way to speak with them at this very moment," Leia said. "Perhaps they will get to the bottom of this apparent misunderstanding."
"This is no misunderstanding," Sub-Commander Torkal snarled. "You are deliberately spreading falsehoods about the Yuuzhan Vong in an attempt to sway the Empire away from peace and towards war. Moff Flennic wisely pointed out that his colleague cannot be as stupid as you portray him. You could easily use your droid abominations to replicate voices and fake such a recording!"
"We don't want the Empire to go to war," Leia said patiently. "We just want their leaders to make an informed decision."
"For example," Kyp passed over another datapad to both Flennic and Torkal. "Perhaps Sub-Commander Torkal can explain why the Yuuzhan Vong need so many people in the Imperial government in the first place. You'll note, Moff Flennic, that the last people on the list are Yuuzhan Vong operatives working within Yaga Minor itself."
Flennic scrolled through the list of known Yuuzhan Vong operatives without betraying anything in his expression or voice. "Interesting."
"Master Durron is right. Sub-Commander Torkal accuses us of trying to sway the Empire towards war," Leia said. "But if the Yuuzhan Vong are for peace, why do they need this many spies in vital areas of your government's infrastructure? This is the exact thing that happened to the New Republic before the Yuuzhan Vong invaded *us*."
Torkal jumped to his feet and pointed a finger at Leia. "I will not stand for these lies and insinuations!"
"Then can you please offer a legitimate reason for why there are so many Yuuzhan Vong on Bastion and other Empire held worlds?" Leia said calmly. "Perhaps another Domain is involved and B'Shith Vorrik is unaware of their presence?"
Torkal's jaw worked furiously. "I will contact my commander for an explanation."
He motioned, and his retinue of Yuuzhan Vong followed him out of the room.
"Well," Kyp whistled. "That went well."
"Do not be deceived," Shaeri said sagely, sitting in a chair away from the meeting table so not to offend the members of Domain Vorrik.

Despite their attitude towards Shamed Ones, those Shamed were still Shamed in their eyes. "Torkal is a priest of the Dark God."
"What?" Leia looked to Shaeri. "But he carries an amphistaff and leads those warriors, doesn't he?"
"No, she's right, he's a priest," Danni said.
"Danni?"
"I had my suspicions when we first met him," Danni said. "Yuuzhan Vong priests and warriors have different customs and mannerisms, mostly due to the lifestyles they live."
"Did you not notice the part of Torkal's forehead where the tissue had been rubbed away until only the bone showed?" Shaeri said, coming to the table and taking Torkal's vacated seat.
"I was trying not to look there," Kyp grimaced. "Self-mutilation really doesn't do anything for me."
"None of the other warriors had that marking," Danni said. "They had their usual scars and disfigurements, but nothing like that."
"That is because the mark is sacred to the Dark God." Shaeri touched her own forehead. "I am not as familiar with the Dark God's practices, but all his priests are known for having that furrow in their foreheads. Some are so devout that they continue to rub away the tissue until the bone is translu…trans…"
"Translucent?" Danni supplied. "See-through?"
"Yes," Shaeri nodded. "See-through. The high priests of the Dark God have but a thin film of bone separating their brain from the air. In Yuuzhan Vong, this mark is called the 'third-eye,' proof of their dedication to their god and a reminder that death can come at any time. Torkal may have been dressed as a warrior and acted like one, but you must remember that they are masters of infiltration and disguise."
"Won't that hole in their head kind of give them away?" Ryza Tyreed, of Kyp's Dozen, spoke out.
"They most likely did not expect me to be here," Shaeri said. "I am still Shamed in their eyes, so they would not have thought me important enough to attend a high-level diplomatic meeting. Otherwise they would have used an ooglith masquer or an implant to cover the marking."
"So you think that he already knew about these plans?" Moff Flennic motioned to the two datapads in front of him.
Shaeri held the Moff's gaze. "I would bet my life on it."
"And you trust this Yuuzhan Vong's word?" Moff Flennic looked to Leia.
Leia nodded solemnly, causing Shaeri to bow her head in thanks. "I do."

Moff Flennic reviewed the information again, then reached for the intercom. "Security detail. This is Moff Flennic. Do not let the Yuuzhan Vong leave this planet. In addition, please detain the following people for interrogation. Lethal force is authorized if either party resists." Moff Flennic then read out the names of the infiltrators that had been identified.
"Those Vong ships in orbit will most likely begin attacking," Kyp warned.
"Torkal said it himself," Moff Flennic grouched. "His people don't have the ships needed to take the Empire. They'd be suicidal to launch such an attack. Besides, I have nearly three-quarters of my sector fleet in orbit. It's impossible for them to do anything more but run."
"I'd start massing your fleet anyway," Kyp groaned at Moff Flennic's choice of words. "According to Shaeri, these guys are like our version of Wraith Squadron. Only, instead of six people, they have an entire Domain with which to carry out their ops. Impossible, or so Kell likes to remind me, is Wraith Squadron's specialty."
No sooner had Kyp finished saying that than explosions and echoes of blasterfire resounded from all about the capital building.
"Report!" Moff Flennic barked.
"The Yuuzhan Vong have broken through and reached their ships! We're being over..." the transmission ended in static after a powerful blast came through the channel.
Through the bay-window of the conference room, the occupants saw a Yuuzhan Vong picket-ship rise and bring its guns to bear.
"Down!" Kyp yelled.
The group dove just as the Yuuzhan Vong ship opened fire. Molten plasma blasted apart the wooden table like it wasn't even there. Ryza Tyreed's screech of pain was cut short as the barrage completely atomized her. Another one of Kyp's Dozen was thrown hard against the wall from the concussion of one of the blasts and his head hit against a light-fixture. He collapsed limply to the ground and was promptly incinerated by another blast.
The picket-ship continued firing, the walls of the room beginning to glow from the heat of the attacks.
Shaeri kept herself pressed over Leia, breathing heavily as she sought to shelter the mother of the avatars of Yun-Harla, Yun-Yammka, and Yun-Ne'shel. Molten debris were dripping onto her back and burning holes in her skin, but she continued to use herself as a shield.
Kyp had Moff Flennic pressed behind a shield of chairs as they attempted to weather the barrage. While Danni and the surviving Dozen members used their combined effort to send the doors to the

room flying off their hinges. The moment they did, blaster bolts poured into the room. Imperial liaison officer, Commander Green was immediately hit by the bolts and collapsed to the ground.
"Someone reprogrammed the security droids!" Danni yelled out over to Kyp.
"What do you want me to do about it!?" Kyp said incredulously. A plasma cannon lined up on him. Cursing, he grabbed Flennic by the collar and pulled the Moff unceremoniously through the room. The cannon opened fire and obliterated the chair-fort.
One of the Dozen tried to stand and take on the security droids, but a plasma burst blew him away.
They were pinned into the room with no way out.
Just then, the picket-ship was stitched by a continuous barrage of ship-to-ship laser fire. Beams of red lanced out with Jedi-precision, right through the dovin basal defenses, and blasted bits of coral off the vessel. The picket-ship quickly veered away, even as the lasers continued to stitch its side an aft. In place of the Yuuzhan Vong vessel, the *Millennium Falcon* hovered into view with its landing ramp down.
"Come on!" Seff called out, gesturing furiously. "Captain Solo's detected a buildup in the building's primary reactors!"
With the picket-ship gone, the Jedi members of the group activated their lightsabers and provided a screen against the blaster bolts being fired by the reprogrammed security droids. Leia carried an unconscious Shaeri in her arms, while Danni helped Moff Flennic up and onto the ramp. One by one, the surviving Jedi clambered onboard.
Seff held up his comlink. "They're all on. Go!"
The ramp closed and the *Falcon* pulled away. Below, the power generators located right next to the capital building ignited in a ball of orange and yellow. Explosions on the mountainside beneath the building threw debris into the air, and the entire structure began to slide down the side of the mountain. It was collapsing in the process, with sparks and more explosions ripping the once magnificent structure to pieces.
Moff Flennic and Kyp hurried to the cockpit. "I have to tell the Sector Fleet to engage."
"*That* Sector Fleet?" Han asked pointing towards the space-docks as the *Falcon* emerged from Yaga Minor's atmosphere.
The space-docks were a blaze as a small fleet of six, newly arrived, Yuuzhan Vong Mataloks poured devastating fire onto the docked vessels. The three ships that had already been in system were busy bombing the ground-based starfighters to dust. Star Destroyers and other heavy ships were being torn to shreds without being given a

chance to escape. Whole squadrons of TIE Fighters and Interceptors were destroyed in their hangars. Any ships that *had* been active above Yaga Minor had borne the brunt of the Yuuzhan Vong ambush and were out of commission. A Star Destroyer, missing its bridge and on fire, was listing dangerously towards one of Yaga Minor's moons. And a *Carrack*-class light cruiser was on a ballistic course towards the space along its side indicated the launch of escape pods, and those on the *Falcon* could only watch helpless as the light cruiser slammed into the center of one of the space docks. The meeting of metal on metal punched a hole through the center of the circular station, and the entire structure began to break apart.

Moff Flennic's face was pale as he saw the Yuuzhan Vong—finished with the defenses of the planet—turn their weapons onto Yaga Minor itself.

"Do you have a destination in mind?" Han said, understanding the man's feelings at having to watch his home-world burn.

Moff Flennic shook himself. He reached over to the navi-computer. "Head to these coordinates. The rest of my Sector Fleet is at Marquarra. We'll get help there."

Han nodded silently and, with one last look at the burning shipyards of Yaga Minor, pulled the levers that triggered their jump to hyperspace.

=}V{= =}V{=

When Jacen and the four other Force users were finally reunited in the deepest part of the Shrupak temple, most of them looked a lot worse than they had first entered the temple. Si'ada was completely pale and looked as if she was going to be sick. She displayed none of her good cheer or optimistic attitude. Natua's face was stony, her hands still balled into tight fists at her side. It was as if she was trying to concentrate on not focusing on a particular memory, but was failing. Even Waxarn appeared traumatized; his eyes wild, and his hands shaking. When the other Knight's eyes met Jacen, Jacen was more than a little unsettled by what he saw.

Only Vergere seemed none-the-worse for wear. In fact, it was as if she had just awoken from a very relaxing nap. She exuded more energy than she had before and seemed a little too pleased with herself for Jacen's comfort. What reason she had to be pleased about, he did not really want to know.

"What do you do? Eat nightmares and dark side energy for breakfast?" Waxarn said with a weak smile, noting Vergere's unbothered countenance.

"You've got to teach us how you do that," Si'ada swallowed.

"When we have the time," Vergere inclined her head graciously.

"That'd be later," Jacen said, motioning to the room.
The central chamber was smaller than they expected. Two stasis pods, opened and unpowered, lay against one wall. Several ritualistic looking tables and tools were laid out in front of another. A large, black, triangle-like device was against the third wall. And in the middle of the room was a fire pit, with the nexus of Force energy centered directly in the center of it. It was fairly faint, and much different than the nexus on Coruscant. When viewed through the Force, the nexus on Coruscant had appeared as a pillar of blinding orange light. This nexus appeared in the Force like a bonfire of flickering green flame.
"That's the nexus?" Si'ada blinked.
"And *that* is a Sith holocron," Vergere motioned to the triangular device along the opposite wall, her posture showing her surprise.
"What are the Kaleesh doing with a Sith holocron?" Waxarn approached the device cautiously.
"Careful," Jacen warned. "It's likely what's contributing to the corruption of the Force nexus. We can look at it later after we've capped the well."
"I left my handbook for capping wells of Force energy in my fighter," Waxarn said wryly, slowly shaking off whatever trauma he had experienced during his trek to the chamber. "Do you have any ideas?"
"Handling this situation is simple enough." Vergere instructed. "The only choice you must make is how you will go about accomplishing it. You have several different choices available for you. You can take this power for yourselves. This nexus is weak enough that you four should be able to absorb what is left without any problems. However, absorbing the nexus will most likely render the surrounding area lifeless, as it is this nexus that is promoting the jungle growth and giving this temple its significance. Without the nexus, I foresee this place becoming a desert, much like the other regions of this planet."
"What else?" Waxarn stared, mesmerized by what he could see of the nexus through the Force.
"You could let the nexus be, but destroy the source of the taint," Vergere motioned to the holocron. "Once the holocron is destroyed, the negative effects of this nexus will dissipate over time and things will return to normal. Though the area will be preserved, it will unfortunately mean that whatever ancient knowledge that holocron has stored will be lost forever."
"We could find out how the Sith managed to merge the Kaleesh and Yuuzhan Vong," Natua seemed saddened by the possible loss of such information. "That holocron could show us how to affect the Yuuzhan

Vong with the Force. Why can't we see what information it contains, then destroy it afterward?"
Vergere inclined her head towards the Falleen apprentice. "To activate a Sith holocron this close to a Force nexus, will most likely send a burst of what you would consider 'dark side' energy into the surrounding areas. The nexus acts as an amplifier, and will enhance the ill-intentions imbued within the device to very unhealthy levels. Without proper training, you and the others outside would be incapacitated by the intensity of the burst. The young knight, Waxarn Kel, knows of what I speak. If you believed the miasma coming from the temple was strong, the pulse of dark side energy will be several times greater than that. Possibly lethal, even. It *is* a Sith holocron after all."
"And you're an expert on Sith holocrons now?" Waxarn raised an eyebrow.
"The knowledge of the arcane was much greater in my time than it is in yours," Vergere smiled serenely. "But if you wish to ignore an old woman's warnings, I will not stop you."
"Is there a third option?" Jacen said quickly.
"Yes," Vergere turned towards Jacen. "But it is one only *you* can take, young Solo."
"Me?"
"Similar to what you did on Coruscant, you can absorb this nexus."
"I thought you said that absorbing it would be bad for the surrounding areas?"
"Once you absorb it, you will use the excess Force energy to issue a command to all things living," Vergere coached. "Much like how you instructed the World Brain to cease its growth, you can imbue the entirety of this region with the command to grow. The Force is in *all* living things after all, and you specialize in this unique connection. By tapping into the very nature around this temple, you can ensure its continuous growth and prosperity. In a way, you will be returning the energies of this nexus back to the rest of the planet. Doing so would leave the holocron intact and solve the issue of this nexus at the same time."
"You're saying I can have my bantha and eat it too," Jacen motioned to the nexus, deep in thought.
"The main thing about eating this bantha is that it will give you some indigestion," Vergere chortled. "You will also have to absorb what most would call 'the taint' within this nexus as well."
"Absorb it?"
"Like your brother or Jedi Rar," Vergere acknowledged, bobbing her head. "You must take within you that which is ailing this place. A small

sacrifice. But is not sacrifice what a Jedi is all about? I have taught you how to look in on yourself, to endure the darkest parts of your mind. The taint will hardly compare to that."
"The others do not have to do anything?"
"You need to channel the full strength of this nexus to accomplish what I have described," Vergere nodded again. "The others will only…get in the way."
"And if he does this, we can really open the holocron without any ill-effect?" Waxarn asked.
"Trusting in my judgment now?" Vergere tilted her head. "But yes. Without the amplifying effects of the nexus, the energies of the holocron will remain at manageable levels."
"Then do it, Jacen," Waxarn said, looking to the other Knight. "If these Sith found a way to manipulate Vong at a molecular level, we *have to* learn how they accomplished it. It could very well change the course of this war."
"I too would like to learn how they accomplished such feats," Natua agreed.
"The Sith learned how to hurt the Vong, I say we use what they learn for good this time around," Si'ada added.
Jacen glanced at the innocently crackling green flames of the Force nexus, then back to the large, stone, triangular device. Slowly, he nodded.
"Okay. Let's do this."
"Step into the center of the nexus and reach out to the very planet itself," Vergere said, her voice taking on a hypnotic quality.
Jacen followed her instructions. As he stepped into the center of the nexus, it flared up in a flash of green flame. The flame didn't hurt, however. It was a comforting sort of warmth, one that could easily lull someone to sleep.
He could still feel the wrongness the Sith had left behind. Jacen frowned and tried to analyze it. If the dark side didn't exist, how did he explain the obvious corruption of the nexus?
The Force is simply obeying the will of the last person to leave an impression in it. Vergere's voice echoed in his mind. *There is no dark or light. Just the will of the Force user. The Sith wanted to inflict pain, suffering, death, so like a droid, that is what the Force is doing. It is up to you to accept the pain and suffering, to accept it and change it to one of peace and contentment. You command the Force, it does not command you.*
Jacen inhaled, spread his arms out, and began to take in the crackling flames around him. To those watching, it appeared that streams of

flickering green sparks were being pulled into all the pores of his body. Jacen kept his breathing even, changing the intent that had been left within the nexus to something less negative. The last Sith had ordered this nexus to cause harm, but *he* was now the master of the nexus. Much like how he would subjugate the slave seed, Jacen forced his own will over that of the Sith's. The Force was his to command. With the power at his fingertips he could do oh so many things.

Jacen reached out to the lifeforms outside of the temple, to the trees and animals, the insects and the flowers. All life on Kalee hummed in resonance, a balanced circle thrown off at this singular juncture, the corrupted nexus. Jacen accepted the pain, the suffering, polluting the nexus and replaced those with his own command. One that ordered the creatures and plants to go on with their lives, to flourish and prosper as they had always done. He was returning the cycle of life to its natural state, before the corruption had affected it. The stream of green sparks flew out from him, passing through the stone walls of the temple and disappearing across the planet.

Jacen exhaled, lowered his arms, and opened his eyes. The job was done.

Vergere nodded in approval as Jacen stepped out from the center of the empty circle of stones. The nexus had been depleted, repurposed, its energies spread throughout the entirety of the planet.

"Now, let us see what the holocron can reveal," Vergere made a gesture, and the other four Force sensitives shuddered at a sudden outpouring of anger and pride as the three-pronged device opened up. Rather than a message, however, a single octagonal device floated at the apex of the device.

"A holocron within a holocron?" Waxarn blinked, recognizing the shape of a standard Jedi holocron. He waved a hand in an attempt to unlock it, but the pieces wouldn't budge.

"You give it a try," Waxarn motioned at Jacen.

Jacen repeated Waxarn's efforts, and the results. The octagonal holocron just wasn't opening.

Vergere stepped forward and plucked the device out of the repulsor field. She tucked it into her robes and looked back to the four Jedi. "We will just have to study this at a later time. For now, I believe we have the task of removing the yorik coral from this temple?"

Jacen and Waxarn nodded. "We can always figure out the holocron later."

"Now we have the fun task of cutting through all that coral," Si'ada groaned. "Why couldn't everything be as easy as absorbing a Force nexus and sending the energy all over a planet?"

"A little manual labor never hurt anyone," Jacen said cheerfully. "Tell that to me *after* we're done hacking through all that coral."

=}VI{= =}VI{=

The atmosphere aboard the *Falcon* was extremely solemn. The surviving members of Kyp's Dozen could do little more than mourn for those that had been killed on Yaga Minor. They didn't even have bodies to bury. Kyp had secluded himself in one of the back rooms of the ship, preferring to grieve in private. The loss of Ryza Tyreed had been as big a blow as any to the Jedi Master. She had been with him almost since the beginning of the Dozen. Had fought alongside him in countless engagements. Her death had hurt him in the Force more than he thought it would. More than he wanted it too.

The younger apprentices had likewise been traumatized at being forced to fight opponents they had actually known. They were clustered around the dejarik board, trying to take their minds of off what had just occurred. Though they were keeping up a tough appearance, they weren't fooling anyone but themselves. And with Shaeri recovering from her injuries, none of the other occupants of the ship were in any sort of mood to help cheer up the three teens.

While Han piloted the vessel, Moff Flennic was seated in the co-pilot's chair with a lost look in his eyes—having watched his home-planet and a good portion of his forces, go down in flames. There was nothing they could have done. The Yuuzhan Vong had plotted this for far too long and had been very well prepared. Even now, the thought of all of the civilians and military personnel being massacred by the Yuuzhan Vong forces, his stomach churned as the scene replayed in his mind over and over again.

Leia grimaced at the HoloNet connection, motioning for Danni to continue to adjust the transmitter. Finally, an image of her brother appeared. Luke wasn't exactly dressed as the former Jedi Grandmaster of the Jedi Order.

"Playing stormtrooper again?" Leia quipped, seeing his outfit.

"*Ha, ha,*" Luke retorted dryly. "*Blame the Wraiths. One of their newer members, a Ratnena Bora, suggested I would get along better with the Imperials if I didn't appear so 'Jedi-y'. She forgot to mention she smeared the insides of this armor with adhesive.*"

"Hey! At least I left the helmet alone!" A protest came from outside the range of the camera. *"You Jedi need to have some fun anyway."*

"Hence her call-sign: Prankster." Luke finished with an ever-suffering sigh.

Leia forced herself to chuckle. Despite the recent events, it was good to see her brother more or less relaxed for once, rather than carrying

the weight of the galaxy on his shoulders. "So I take it everything is okay on your end?"
"It depends on what you mean by 'okay.' Moff Rosset's forces opened fire on us the moment we approached Entralla. A Yuuzhan Vong garrison was hiding in his sector and the Moff didn't appear to be the one in full control of his fleet. When the Wraiths went back for a sneak peak, they found that Moff Rosset had actually been imprisoned in his own brig by a Yuuzhan Vong infiltrator posing as his second-in-command. It must have been one of the ones Moff Sarreti missed. Rosset was rather unhappy about that, according to Face."
"I would be too," Leia remarked. "We're having trouble on our end here. Moff Flennic's lost Yaga Minor and a good portion of his sector to the Yuuzhan Vong fleet elements hiding just on the other side of the border with the Unknown Regions. We're en route to Marquarra to meet up with the rest of his Sector Fleet, but we'll probably have to fall back shortly. They Yuuzhan Vong were definitely prepared for any sort of reveal."
"Have you contacted Moff Sarreti?"
"Long range HoloNet buoys seem to be out. Either that or the frequencies are being jammed," Leia shook her head. "What's your status?"
"*Complicated,"* Luke winced. *"We have Moff Rosset with us, but the infiltrator managed to have Rosset declared a traitor and a Rebel spy. We have both Imperial and Yuuzhan Vong interdictor ships barring all hyperspace routes out of this sector. Fortunately, one of Face's Imperial contacts pulled through for us. We're currently guests of the Red Moon mercenary group."*
"Mercenary?" Leia repeated skeptically. "What's to stop them from selling you out to the Yuuzhan Vong?"
"*Their leader used to be in the Rebel Alliance,"* Luke said. "*And they're a lot like the Wraiths."*
"Please tell me you're joking, Master Skywalker," Danni interjected. "One set of Wraiths is enough. Two and the entire galaxy might as well kiss its butt goodbye."
"*Kell Tainer and a man named Hugo Cutter are already making wagers to see who has the deadliest recipe for explosives,"* Luke shuddered in acknowledgement. *"Anyway, we're relatively safe for now. The Wraiths and the Red Moons are working out a plan to help Rosset retake his sector. But it's safe to say that, for now, this Sector Fleet won't be coming to Bastion's aid any time soon. The only positive is that we know for sure that the Sector Fleet won't willingly help the Yuuzhan Vong attack any Imperial assets."*

"Between Rosset and Flennic's forces, the Remnant has lost the use of two of their eight sector fleets, nearly a quarter of their forces," Leia said worriedly.
"Not to mention they now have a gaping hole where Yuuzhan Vong forces can mass undetected," Danni added.
"Long range comms are also out in this sector," the young voice of the Wraith's new communications specialist and slicer, Ratnena Bora called out in the background.
"So it looks like the Yuuzhan Vong are going to take the Remnant sector by sector then," Luke concluded grimly.
"We can't even send out the Dozen to warn the rest of the Remnant because they lost all of their fighters on Yaga Minor," Danni added softly.
"Luke, do you think your people are in range to contact Anakin and the others?" Leia asked sharply. "If they can pass our message on, or even get to Bastion ahead of us, we might have a chance to warn the rest of the Imperial Remnant."
"The Wraiths are on it now," Luke nodded. *"If that fails, we'll try to get in contact with Kyle Katarn at Ord Sedra. And if <u>that</u> fails, we'll try the Moff of the Perrinn sector. Though our Imperial liaison tells us that Moff Crowal was in favor of letting the Yuuzhan Vong destroy the New Republic, we're hoping more recent events will change her mind. In the meantime, if I'm understanding their plans right, the Wraiths and Red Moons are going to be launching a series of hit-and-run attacks on Yuuzhan Vong assets. We'll try to keep the Yuuzhan Vong busy enough here so that they won't advance any time soon."*
"Moff Rosset's sector separates Moff Flennic's sector from the rest of the Remnant," Leia commented. "We don't have the ships or support to do much to stop any reinforcements from entering your sector, but I don't want to call in Taan's people just yet. We'll just do our best to gather intel."
"That's fine. Between Booster, Face, and Colonel Stormcaller, we should be able to hold off long enough for Anakin to send help."
"Hopefully he's wrapping up his survey mission and hasn't run into any problems," Leia agreed. "May the Force be with you, Luke."
"You too."
=}VII{= =}VII{=
The Shrupak temple on Kalee had changed nearly everyone who had entered it, there was no mistaking that. Whatever the four Jedi had experienced in their personal trials still reflected on their faces even after a full day's hard work.

Slicing away the yorik coral connected to the temple had proven a more than laborious task. Yet, the Yuuzhan Vong vessel had been separated from the temple, as promised, and the task the Jedi had had in store for them had been accomplished. Which was fortunate since the physical and mental exhaustion had pushed them to their limits. The scene this bedraggled group emerged to only added to their agitated state. The sun had just set, so the glow from a multitude of lightsabers immediately caught their attention. Waxarn Kel's followers, the Death Knights, had surrounded Anakin and Tahiri and were holding them at lightsaber point. Off to the side, Mara was with the other two apprentices, Jysella Horn and Yaqeel Saav'etu, trying to regain control of the situation. The Kaleesh were looking on from the surrounding foliage and village remains.
"Anakin," Jacen commented with a raised eyebrow, approaching the scene.
"Hey Jace," Anakin said brightly, as if he wasn't illuminated by the business ends of a number of lightsabers.
"Maez?" Waxarn asked his second in command. He took several steps forward in an attempt to defuse the situation, Si'ada and Vergere following him like shadows.
"Waxarn, I'm glad you're here. Solo's Twi'lek pet killed Doreil, Arvas, Relan, Vepar, and Trina!"
"Oh?" Waxarn looked to Anakin, the Solo's emaciated state clear in the glow of the blue and green lightsaber blades.
"Alema and Anakin fell to the dark side," Maez said. "Si'ada and the others all saw it. All saw what they did with the Force. Heck, you can even see the consequences on Anakin now!"
"Maez," Waxarn said in a low voice, rubbing at his face. "In the temple the Force allowed me to be by Eryl's side in her last moments. I was on Myrkr with her and all the others. Saw the choices Anakin had been forced to make. He is the furthest thing from a dark Jedi as can be."
"But…"
"Alema Rar, might be another story. But since she's not here at the moment, there's no point holding your lightsabers on Anakin and Tahiri. They are the reasons this war is going to end. It'd be stupid of us to start doubting each other when it was Anakin and his siblings who brought the Jedi together in the first place. Tell me, does that sound like something a dark Jedi would do?"
"Well no…"
"You and the others have followed me this far. Trust me on this. Lower your weapons," Waxarn spoke evenly.

Maez hesitated, his gaze dancing from Waxarn, to Si'ada, and Vergere. Finally he resettled his focus on Waxarn, Maez nodded and deactivated his lightsaber. The others promptly did the same. "Alright. Waxarn. You haven't let us down yet."
"Thank you, Maez," Waxarn clapped him in the shoulder.
Breaths of relief were released.
"Come on," Jacen motioned to the rest of the group. "Let's get off this planet and update Moff Sarreti."
The group traveled back through the jungle in relative quiet, the past few day's events having worn on all of them. There still was a tension in the air between Waxarn's people and the rest of the Jedi. It was the sort of tension that wasn't going to go away anytime soon. Everyone felt it, but no one wanted to comment on it.
When they reached their ships, the Death Knights froze at the sight of the fighters of their deceased companions. Alema's own fighter was already missing, and from the state of the five other X-wings, she had field stripped them of anything useful. The cargo compartments were open, and the dangling emergency fuel lines emerging from the five Death Knight X-wings made it clear that Alema had drained them of their fuel.
Sensing the animosity between the two groups of younger Jedi rising, Mara motioned to the apprentices. "Natua, Yaqeel, Jysella, get into the *Shadow,* now."
"I really hope you have a good explanation, Anakin," Waxarn said, the freshly healed burns on his face making his scowl more prominent. "The Alema I saw in my vision was about as unstable as one can get. I would like to believe in you, but it would be a poor start for your leadership if you continue to defend her actions. Murder is murder."
"Not if it's in self-defense," Tahiri snapped darkly, supporting her exhausted boyfriend. "The rest of your people know. Your *friends* were killed attacking her. What was she supposed to do, let them kill her?"
"If she was so innocent, why did she run in the first place?" Waxarn's supporter, Jalinae said. "She even admitted to being a dark Jedi. What were they supposed to do, let her run amuck?"
"And you were harboring her all this time," Nixa, the Trandoshan Knight, added with a hiss. "I find it hard to believe that you knew *nothing* of her fall considering the friendship you had with her."
"Still have," Tahiri seethed.
"Tahiri," Anakin interjected.
Tahiri looked mutinous, but stood down.
Anakin exhaled slowly, his mind working lightyears a minute as he struggled to come up with the words to keep the situation from

deteriorating any further. "Waxarn, like Tahiri said, Alema will *always* be our friend. But it does not mean that we will always agree with her methods or decisions. Whether she 'fell' to the dark side or not doesn't matter at this moment. I think we can all agree that there are more pressing matters in this galaxy than hunting a lone Force-sensitive through the stars."
"I will second that," Natua re-emerged from the *Jade Shadow.* "We have an urgent message relayed to us by Moff Crowal. The Yuuzhan Vong have begun their conquest of the Empire. Three of the eight sectors have already fallen. We have been ordered to fall back to Bastion as soon as we receive the message."
=}Chapter End{=
A\N: Ratnena Bora is from Mik Sunrider's Adventures of Tahiri series, borrowed with permission. =). Jagged Fel makes his exit from this story (until end chapter), so that's another character gone. Also, with the death of Ryza Tyreed, I have continued my very unhealthy habit of killing off my OCs…(definitely not meant to foreshadow anything regarding any other OCs currently still among the living).

ADA 43

Forty-Three
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"You know, you did tell your friends we needed help *stopping* the coup that was to occur in a month; not help starting it before we were ready?" Colonel Vana Dorja of Imperial Intelligence drawled, as her shot—her accuracy enhanced by her cybernetic eye which she had obtained as a result of a nearly-successful attempt on her life—drilled a Yuuzhan Vong sympathizer square between his forehead. Even though the light was low and the targets were a good thirty meters away, her cybernetic enhancements kept her accuracy rate at a hundred percent.
"I just told Anakin a coup was coming up in a month!" Ganner called back. An anti-personnel missile exploded among a group of stormtroopers, sending them flying. "I thought he was smart enough to figure out which part of that coup I needed help with!"
"This is why we never ask you Rebels for help! You lot always make things worse!"
"This isn't so bad!" Ganner fired blindly.
"It rained just the other day and we're chasing traitors and Vong inside a sewer! Unlike the stormtrooper outfits, our rebreathers don't block out the smell!"

"And it's my fault the infiltrators made their base of operations in the sewers beneath Ravelin?" Ganner said, referring to the capital city they were now under. "Besides, I don't smell anything."
"You and your Jedi sorcery!" Vana blasted another sympathizer in frustration.
Another rocket blew by them and caused the piping system above to cave in right on top of them. Mud, slush, and things Ganner didn't want to think about, immediately sloshed over them.
"Oh, come on!" Ganner yelled down the sewer-way.
"On the bright side, at least we know they weren't able to sabotage the power plants leading to the planetary defenses," Vana said sarcastically.
"Naïve optimism is supposed to be *my* thing."
"And indignant rage is supposed to be mine," Vana quipped right back. "*Now* can we do things my way?"
Ganner glanced around the corner at the dozen or so individuals holed up within one of the sewer's service stations. A blaster bolt nearly grazed his face, and he pulled back with a yelp. "Fine!"
Vana tapped the comlink that had been installed in her cranial implants. After another short exchange, she edged backwards behind cover a little further away. Ganner groaned and dove over to where she was. A split second later, anti-ship missiles, launched from a wing-pair of TIE Defenders, blew apart the ground above, and the sewers below. Right where the Vong sympathizers and infiltrators had been. The entire area flash-fried and a plume of fire traversed the pipes, charbroiling anyone who hadn't had the mind to take cover.
When the flames were gone, Ganner made a motion to ward away the plume of smoke. "Great. Baked sewer. Urgh. That's right up there on the list of things I could have gone without smelling." Ganner tried to breath and nearly retched instead. "Yup, right there with wet Wookie and a Hutt's behind. Though a Hutt's behind would probably smell a lot like baked sewer now that I think of it."
Vana ignored his ramblings. She had gotten used to it in the last several months partnered with him, and gave out orders to the surviving stormtroopers. "Stalgis, Tarl, secure the scene and execute any survivors. Rhysode and I will be returning top side to see if any of the other containment teams need help."
The stormtroopers went off to follow orders, while she and Ganner headed to the surface for some much needed fresh air. They emerged from the ground at the edge of one of the primary power plants outside Ravelin's city limits. The power plant was a heavily secured zone, providing power to the city's defenses and the capital building's

deflector shields and turbolaser defenses. It had its own automated defenses and a kilometer-long plain of rocky ground all around it to keep anyone from approaching on the ground undetected. The Yuuzhan Vong infiltrator and two sympathizers within the base had already been apprehended, and the team that Ganner and Vana had just taken out had been the Yuuzhan Vong's 'Plan B.'
A large crater a quarter of a kilometer away indicated just where the infiltrators and sympathizers had been stopped.
"This is Colonel Dorja," Vana contacted the *Widowmaker*, the home-base of Moff Sarreti's special task group. A decontamination team, in the meantime, did their best to drown the two of them in disinfectants and odor-eliminating sprays. "Target Alpha-A secured. Requesting further orders."
"Colonel, the Supreme Commander wishes to meet with you and the Wise Man back at the Rimcee Station," Arien Yage, captain of the frigate, replied in clipped and efficient tones common among Imperial officers . 'Wise Man' was Ganner's call-sign, which he picked out much to everyone else's dismay. Vana had wanted to change it to 'wise-guy,' or its less polite equivalent of an intelligent rear-end, but hadn't been successful in her efforts thus far. *"We're sending a transport to pick the two of you up now. It's manned by Galactic Alliance Intelligence operatives because we don't exactly know who to trust at the moment."*
"Wait a minute," Ganner interrupted over the sound of the large dryers blowing hot air over he and Vana. "Did the Empire's Imperial forces just ask the Galactic Alliance for help?"
"We did not," Captain Yage replied stoically. *"We merely informed your government that the Empire would be more useful to them relatively intact. Your analysts agreed and your government sent several of their Intelligence units to help out."*
"Guilting them into helping out is practically the same thing," Ganner said wryly, nodding his thanks to the decontamination team. He glanced up at the sky. "We see the transport now. Wise Man, out."
The transport was definitely an older model, but it also looked highly modified. In fact, it looked more like a ship Jan Ors or Mara Jade would drive than an actual military vessel. He raised an eyebrow at Vana, who looked a little less impressed than he did. Apparently working with her Galactic Alliance counterpart wasn't high on her things to do list.
"Come on, where's that friendly rivalry that our two sides are supposed to have," Ganner cajoled as the ship made its final approach to land.
"Wise Man," Vana winced as she said the name. Now that they were out in the open though, there was no telling who else could be

listening. "That rivalry normally involves one of our people trying to kill or spy on one of your people, and vice versa."
"Really?" Ganner said, with mock surprise. "But I thought it was a friendly rivalry. Rebel and Imperial agents, just has that nice ring to it."
"And your idiocy is giving my head a bothersome ringing sound," Vana glowered, shoving him in the shoulder. "Let us pray that Captain Yage has sent someone tolerable, or this will be a very long night."
Ganner glanced at the time on the readout of his comlink and couldn't resist. "Technically, it's day already."
"How I put up with you for nearly half a year, I'll never know," Vana groaned.
The transport touched down and the side hatch opened. A young teenage boy with white-blond hair—probably no older than fifteen, Ganner guessed—waved them over. "Come on, we don't have all day."
"At least he sounds Imperial," Vana muttered under her breath.
"Let's hope he isn't the pilot," Ganner said. "If Galactic Alliance Intelligence has started sending teenage boys out to do their work, I'm quitting."
"And that's different than you Jedi, how?" Vana whispered, as they approached the ramp.
"For one, Jedi and Intelligence are two different things."
"You can say that again," Vana retorted with a falsely sweet smile, made slightly scarier by the fact that the gesture caused her skin to tighten around her cranial implants, which in turn caused their glow to shine out from beneath her skin. Having half of one's head light up an eerie red wasn't at all calming or funny.
The two boarded the ship and Ganner raised an eyebrow at the teen. "Aren't you a little young to be an Intelligence operative?"
"As co-pilot, I can vent the cargo hold if we ever accidently pick up any unwanted guests," the teenage boy said tonelessly. "Oh, and did I mention we've stationed the two of you in the cargo hold?"
Ganner glanced at Vana. "He definitely has an Imperial sense of humor."
"Joy," Vana deadpanned. "You'll do, kid. Take us to the cockpit."
"Sure, mom's expecting you anyway, Colonel." The kid headed towards their destination, while Vana and Ganner mouthed 'mom?' behind his back.
"And yes, my mom. I can sense the two of you do that you know." The teen added as the door to the next room opened.
"Sense?" Vana repeated, she sent a resigned look at Ganner. As if all the credits the kid had built up with his Imperial accent had just been flushed away. "You're a Jedi too?"

"From my dad's side," the teen said with a single nod.
"Emperor's ears," Vana swore. "You Jedi just keep popping up everywhere. I thought you people were supposed to be an order of celibate monks!"
"What are you looking at me for?" Ganner objected. "*I* don't have any kids running around…that I know of."
"You're a Jedi too?" The blond teen raised an eyebrow.
"Yup," Ganner said.
The teen evaluated Ganner once over, then shrugged. "I guess Jedi really do come in all types."
"Hey!"
Vana smothered a grin as her opinion of the blond kid went back up. They entered the cockpit and took a seat in the passenger chairs, while the kid slid into the co-pilot's seat. A woman with similar white-blond hair tied back in a pony-tail, sat in the pilot's seat.
"Welcome aboard. If you could strap yourselves in, we'll have you to your destination in no time."
"Thanks for this, by the way," Ganner added, buckling himself in as the ship rose off the ground.
"No thanks needed. My orders are clear; I'm to keep this ship running and to fly you to whatever destination you require." The woman's Imperial accent pronounced. It was clear where the teenage boy got his looks and accent from.
"Mom, he's a Jedi too," the teen said, motioning to Ganner.
A pair of blue eyes flickered up to gaze at a mirror installed on the control console. "A Jedi working for the Empire?"
"On loan from the Galactic Alliance," Ganner corrected.
"The Order 'loans' out Jedi?" The ship left Bastion's orbit and jumped to hyperspace.
"With the full intention of having them returned safe and unharmed," Ganner nodded. "There's a steep fee if I'm damaged in anyway."
"We are exempt from any damage he already had before he came into our possession," Vana added drolly.
Ganner sighed. Evidently Vana had indeed embraced the rivalry between Rebels and Imperials. Only, since the pilot had an Imperial accent, *he* had become the Rebel.
"You were a former Imperial pilot?" Vana asked as the stream of hyperspace flew by the cockpit windows.
"From Corulag during the High Empire," the pilot nodded. "My husband and I retired there once the war was over. Started a family." She motioned with her head towards her son. "Then the Yuuzhan Vong invaded and everything went to hell."

"Your husband, the Jedi?"
"That's right. He's still on Corulag right now, with our daughter, helping the resistance against the Yuuzhan Vong puppet government."
"I'm sorry about Corulag," Ganner said sympathetically. He knew how hard it was to watch or hear about the fall of one's own home-planet.
"Thank you."
Their ship dropped out of hyperspace minutes later.
"Rogue Shadow, this is Rimcee Station, we have you on our scopes now. Transmit authorization and code clearance or we will open fire."
"*Rogue Shadow* transmitting our clearance now," the pilot replied after a measured beat.
"Transmission received, you are cleared to dock. After offloading your passengers, your government has recalled you to Kuat, code Urgent."
"Affirmative, thank you for the message."
The transport docked with the station and Vana and Ganner bid the pilots goodbye. The airlock shut behind them and the ship pulled away and disappeared once more into hyperspace.
Awaiting the Jedi and Intelligence operative was the leader of the Imperial armed forces, Grand Admiral Gilad Pellaeon.
"Sir!" Vana immediately snapped to attention.
Ganner bowed his head respectfully. "Grand Admiral."
"Thank you both for your haste," Gilad said smoothly. They moved briskly through the space station's corridors "The situation has deteriorated over the last few hours. Although we have secured the Braxant sector, we have just lost contact with the Carrion sector. The last ships to make it out report Yuuzhan Vong advancing up from Dactruria and through Gelda. There are also reports that Moff Norda was killed in his office by an explosion. But as we've lost communications with that sector, we cannot confirm this."
"And the Perinn sector?" Vana inquired.
"Currently cut off and isolated. From what we have learned from couriers, Grandmaster Skywalker and reinforcements from the Galactic Alliance are helping Moff Crowal's sector fleet stem the tide at the moment. Again, without HoloNet access, we don't know much more."
"And with the fall of the Carrion sector, the Perrinn sector is vulnerable on three fronts now," Vana noted.
"Correct. This is one of the reasons why I had the two of you recalled. Captain Yage can handle the rounding up of the Yuuzhan Vong spies on Bastion. What we have to do is figure out how to keep stop the Yuuzhan Vong from advancing any further. The Imperial Navy has gathered at both Muunilinst and Ord Thoden with the intention of accomplishing this task. But at the moment, I am not confident they

will succeed. They will be going up against an enemy they haven't fought before and will be unused to the tactics and technologies, despite the intel the Galactic Alliance has given us."
"The two of us can't stop a Vong fleet, sir," Ganner said as the doors to the conference room swooshed open.
"That's *Yuuzhan* Vong fleet, Media-Boy!" Tahiri's voice filled with mock indignation.
Ganner's head whipped about so fast he nearly gave himself whiplash. "Tahiri!" He glanced about the rest of the room and saw it was full of Jedi.
"Red stormtrooper armor?" Anakin commented with a smirk of amusement.
"And a cape? Making a fashion statement, are you?" Jacen chuckled.
Ganner defended his outfit. "There's nothing wrong with my disguise."
"Ganner," Mara Jade Skywalker spoke up. "*Everything* is wrong with it."
Ganner flared his cape dramatically. "Yeah, that's the fun part."
Welcoming hand-shakes and fond back-slapping ensued for the next few seconds as Ganner happily, greeted the rest of the Jedi. As much fun as he had had, he had to admit that being the only Jedi got rather lonely at times.
"Waxarn, you still running around with the Death Knights?" Ganner said, shaking the partially-burned Knight's hand.
"You still working on that winning grin of yours?" Waxarn remarked, clasping Ganner's forearm with a welcome shine in his eyes.
"You know it," Ganner said, smiling.
"You two know each other?" Tahiri spoke up.
"I used to be a Death Knight. Well, before they were called Death Knights, and when Waxarn still had hair. Wurth, Waxarn, and I all admired Kyp Durron's philosophy of taking the fight to the enemy and we had formed our own little group, fan-club, whatever you want to call it," Ganner chuckled fondly at those memories. "Wow, that seems like ages ago."
"Eleven years," Waxarn said with a whimsical nod.
"I see a lot of new faces," Ganner motioned.
"War does unflattering things to Jedi," Waxarn admitted. "I give them a way to focus their rage."
"If the reunion is finished," Gilad Pellaeon interrupted delicately. The group of Jedi sat back down. "I have heard that the Jedi have something called a 'battlemeld,' and that this was used to great effect during the Battle of Ebaq Nine."
"That is true," Anakin said.

"Then I am hoping that you would be willing to add to the capabilities of the two Imperial fleets with yet another battlemeld. If you can help coordinate the movements of the fleet, maybe you can make up for the lack of experience my officers have against the Yuuzhan Vong."
"The only problem is that the less Jedi there are in a meld, the less effective it will be," Jacen spoke up. "If you want to guarantee a victory, it would be best if we were all present."
"We can confidently protect Muunilinst or Ord Thoden," Mara spoke up, motioning to the holo-images in the middle of the conference table. "But if we try both, it's more than likely we'll fail."
A shadow flickered across Gilad Pellaeon's face as the fate of an entire sector hung on his next few words. Ganner felt sorry for the experienced leader; knowing that either choice would condemn millions of lives to death. It was not a decision Ganner hoped he would ever have to make.
"The fleet at Muunilinst is larger because it is on a direct hyperspace line to Bastion and because its sector is highly populated," Gilad began, thinking out loud. "But since the Carrion sector fell, you would be at risk of a pincer attack. The fleet at Ord Thoden will most definitely not be able to hold out for long without the support of the Carrion sector fleet, but the Taspir system contains one of the largest Imperial military bases and represents a bulk of our strength in that region. If it were to fall, it would greatly hurt the morale of the soldiers."
"We can try to protect both," Mara said, after a silent conversation with the other Jedi. "But there will be no guarantee we'll succeed."
"But there is a chance?" Pellaeon looked relieved when Mara nodded. "There is. But it's a small one. Anakin is capable of affecting the Yuuzhan Vong on a level deeper than any other Jedi. Though not as strong, Jacen and Tahiri can likewise sense the Yuuzhan Vong in the Force. If we send Tahiri with Jacen, and have Anakin in a separate group, we can spread out our abilities."
"Have Waxarn and the others go with Tahiri and Jacen," Anakin recommended, agreeing with Mara's assessment. "Ganner, Aunt Mara, and the apprentices can come with me. We'll take the battle group at Ord Thoden. The others can have Muunilinst. One thing though, if either fleet tries to stay and slug it out, they won't win. The commanders of both fleets need to know that we'll be launching a fighting retreat, with the battle eventually decided over Taspir and Bastion."
"Taspir and Bastion?" Pellaeon said, staring calculatingly at the young Knight.

"The Yuuzhan Vong have studied Imperial tactics. They know that you will stand your ground, that Imperial doctrines don't have much room for retreating in battle. They will not expect you to withdraw unless you fear defeat. Draw them in, hit them, then continue the retreat," Anakin said, receiving nods of support from the others. "Keep their interest up just enough that they won't settle down and garrison a system. We'll rely on the planetary defenses of the two Imperial strongholds to help even the odds."
The grand admiral let out a short laugh. "I am glad you are on our side, Solo. I would hate to go up against that devious mind of yours any time soon. Very well. I'll ensure that none of the fleet commanders are foolish enough to try to stand and fight. I'll join you personally at Ord Thoden. Moff Sarreti has already taken his own sector fleet to Muunilinst."
"It will be a pleasure," Anakin inclined his head.
"Yes, my young friend. I think it will."
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Sannah tried to keep her heart from beating out of her chest on the trip over to Arda III. Mid-way between Mandalore and Raxis Prime, Arda III was considered neutral ground and perfect for talks between Boba's Mandalorians and *Kyr'tsad*—Death Watch—Mandalorians. In addition to Boba Fett and a squad of his Supercommandos, a delegation from the political arm of Mandalore, the planet, was also joining them. This delegation was more to help the mediation than anything else; since the people of Mandalore were still neutral in the conflict between the *Ori'ramikade* and *Kyr'tsad.* A conflict which had existed for several generations over the course of sixty years.
It was times like this when Sannah wished Doran was around to lighten the mood. After four weeks, she had still yet to see him. He had remained on Raxis Prime to help train the Supercommando recruits, and pack up the base in preparation for a Yuuzhan Vong attack.
"Take a deep breath," Tyria said softly, sensing Sannah's agitation.
"Right, deep breath," Sannah repeated. She could see the *Kyr'tsad* delegation's shuttle through the view port.
"Trust in the Force," Tyria continued. "What will happen, will happen. There's no sense worrying about it."
"Except, if I screw this up, there's going to be a whole lotta dead Mandalorians," Sannah swallowed.
"One thing you shouldn't get from Doran is his ability to over-dramatize everything," Tyria remarked, placing a reassuring hand on the Melodie teen's shoulders. "Look at it this way. There would have been already been 'whole lotta dead Mandalorians' without your presence in the first

place. It is because of you that they have an opportunity to sort out their differences without blasters and vibroblades. Nothing you say or do can make things worse than they could be, only better."
Sannah offered Tyria a weak smile and nodded. "Did Doran ever have to do something like this?"
"Help negotiate a ceasefire between two sworn enemies?"
"Yeah."
"Uh huh. He tell you that adventure on Munto Codru?"
Sannah's face was a mask of concentration as she mentally went through the many tales he had told her. And then, the story came to her. "That was when he was kidnapped by a family in order for them to gain leverage on you to take down a rival political family."
"Yup," Tyria was once again amused at how Sannah seemed to know all of their adventures. "One of the leading Codru-Ji families had tried to kidnap a rival family's child. Unfortunately, during the attempt, a rock-slide accidently killed the child being kidnapped. A bitter feud broke out between the two families, with retaliatory kidnappings and killings breaking out between them and allied families. Doran and I just happened to arrive on the planet as the feud was boiling over. Now, even though Doran was a kidnapping victim, he managed to talk both sides down and avert a potentially deadly civil war. I couldn't have been more proud of him at that moment than I was. You're like Doran in many ways, Sannah, so I know you'll do just as well."
Sannah bowed her head. "Thank you, Tyria."
"Besides, I know Dinua, and she wouldn't have let you go any further with your idea if she didn't think you could pull it off. You're a *Jetii*, remember?"
"Right," Sannah began to breathe a bit easier as the *Kell Dragon* touched down. "Jedi. Jedi Fish-Girl, reporting for duty. Oh, boy, am I going to have stories to tell the other Melodie or what?"
Tyria grinned. "That's the spirit." The hatch opened and the two exited the ship.
Four other vessels likewise landed in the open field of grass. One ship was Boba's personal craft, carving through the skies like a raptor searching for its prey. A shuttle from Mandalore itself, carrying a diplomatic detachment, touched down as well. And another gunship holding the rest of the Supercommandos parked opposite of a light-assault vessel containing the *Kyr'tsad* leadership.
As the passengers of the different ships disembarked, Sannah felt an unusual tremor in the Force. It was extremely weak, but definitely present. Sannah blinked in surprise; another Jedi, or at least a Force sensitive, had arrived.

"Tyria?" Sannah whispered.
"I know. The lead figure of the Mandalorian delegation," Tyria tilted her head subtly.
Sannah glanced towards the elaborately dressed group of four individuals and noticed a woman with red hair, streaked with grey, stand out from the others. Though the woman was older than Tyria, her exact age wasn't clear at first glance, or even a second glance. The red-haired woman was still physically fit and probably looked much younger than she actually was.
The woman noticed Sannah's gaze, and aged, green eyes softened ever so slightly at seeing the young apprentice.
"When did Mandalorians start having their own Jedi?" Sannah said in a low voice, following Tyria towards the others.
"Worry about that later," Tyria said with a mysterious grin. "It's show time."
Sannah glanced towards the Mandalorian warrior portion of the group and fought back a groan. The Supercommandos and Death Watch Mandalorians were in full battle armor and armed to the teeth. If that wasn't enough, the *Ori'ramikade* were wearing green armor, which Dinua had taught her signified duty. While the Death Watch Mandalorians were wearing black, Mandalorian for Justice. A lone Death Watch Mandalorian in red and black armor stepped forward to stand toe-to-toe with Boba. The Mandalorian's helmet was unique in that it stood out from the rest of her armor. It was painted blue save for the white tones around a slanted T-shaped visor; clearly a helmet that had been inherited from someone else.
"So, the Vizsla line still lives," Boba said, amusement clear in his voice.
"I am Verde Vizsla, the granddaughter of Pre Vizsla, and current leader of the *Kyr'tsad,*" the red Mandalorian said coldly. "I see you have lowered the *Mando'ade* even further by allying with Jedi."
"It's thanks to these Jedi you're still alive," Boba said smoothly, motioning towards Tyria and Sannah. "They are naïve enough to think that anything will come of these negotiations."
"More the fool for you then, for going along with this charade."
"Watch your tone, *hut'uun,"* snapped one of Boba's Mandalorians. "You will address *Mand'alor* with respect."
"And you will watch *your* tone, *di'kut,"* spat a Death Watch Mandalorian, jabbing a finger into the armored plating of the other Mandalorian's chest.
Subject of the finger poke didn't appreciate the emphasis and staggered the Death Watch Mandalorian with a fist to his helmet.

In seconds, Sannah and Tyria found themselves between the two groups of Mandalorians, with whining and clicking filling the air as they all charged and readied their weapons.
"*Mand'alor*, Lady Vizsla," Sannah breathed, quickly recalling how the *Kyr'tsad* leader had been addressed over the comm-line. "Please. Lower your weapons."
"And place them on a pile on the ground," Tyria backed up the younger Jedi. "This is a discussion for peace, not for war. Weapons are not needed."
"We don't take orders from…."
"Very well," Boba cut off Verde's protest. He unslung his disintegrator rifle and detached a series of explosives. He removed his pistol from his holster and laid it on the ground. Once that was done, he held out his arms to show that he was unarmed, and took a step away from his weapons. Both Dinua and Jintar were next to follow their leader's example, placing their weapons on the ground and stepping away.
Surprise cut through the tension.
Seemingly uncertain at first, Verde Vizsla exhaled slowly, then removed her blaster pistols and set them on the ground. Knives, thermal detonators, and poison darts joined the pistols.
One by one, Mandalorians from both sides disarmed themselves.
"You too, Jedi," Verde motioned to Tyria's vibroblades and Sannah's lightsaber.
"Naturally," Tyria agreed, removing her own weapons.
Once everyone was unarmed, an awkward silence filled the clearing. It was as if everyone knew they were on the cusp of something momentous, but no one else knew how to proceed.
The delegation from Mandalore stepped up and made that decision for everyone.
"Boba Fett, acting *Mand'alor* of the Mandalorian Protectorate, has informed us of a possible re-unification between his group and the rest of the *Ori'ramikade*," the red-headed woman Sannah had seen earlier, began. "We are not opposed to this. As always, Mandalore has favored peace between your faction and his. Should you be willing to give up your violent ways, all *Kyr'tsad* will be offered complete amnesty and be welcomed back to Mandalore without any questions. You will be allowed to continue your fight for the Mandalore you wish to create, but politically, and with words as your weapons."
The red-haired woman stepped back and glanced briefly at Tyria, before motioning for Sannah to step forward. The Melodie Jedi swallowed nervously, but turned to address the two groups.

"The Yuuzhan Vong *are* coming for *Manda'yaim,*" Sannah spoke up, her voice gaining strength as she went on. "No one here wants to see what happened to Coruscant happen to *Manda'yaim*. You are all Mandalorian regardless of your beliefs, of your grudges, of your history. Shouldn't the *Kyr'tsad* and *Ori'ramikade,* both of whom care about their home-world, join hands and prevent its destruction? Enough Mandalorian blood has been spilt. *Gar cuyi an vode. Gar cuyi an. Mando'ade.*" *You are all brothers, you are all Mandalorians.*
"The *Kyr'tsad* cannot unify with the *Or'ramikade,"* Verde said firmly. Everyone tensed. "Not as long as the *Or'ramikade* debase everything that it means to be a Mandalorian by working with the Jedi."
"Then operate separately, just like you always have," Boba said aloud. He took off his helmet and placed it under one arm, holding out the other. "Only, as allies instead of enemies. Our two sides have carried on this feud long enough. You *know* that what we've been doing is idiotic when a Jedi child makes more sense than us."
Verde Vizsla hesitated for several long seconds. During which time, the Mandalorains on both sides shifted anxiously. Finally, the Death Watch leader undid her own helmet. The face of the blond-haired, blue-eyed woman surprised many. She looked to be in her twenties, but only just. Though she was pale and gaunt, her eyes still had a youthfulness about them that didn't seem to match the rest of her. Seemingly almost reluctant, she held out her own hand.
"To stop Mandalorians from killing one and other, I swear an allegiance of my clan to yours." Verde said.
Boba clasped her forearm and she gripped his. "We will remain separate, yet will defend each other against common enemies. We will foreswear all grudges against our peoples' past actions and start anew. *Cin vhetin par an.*" *A clean start for all.*
"I accept this on behalf of my clan. *Ni dinu ner gaan naakyc, jorcu ni nu copaani kyr'amur ner vod.Haat, Ijaa, Haa'it." Honor my offer of truce, for I would not willingly shed my brothers' blood. Truth, honor, vision.*
"*Haat, Ijaa, Haa'it*," Boba repeated, sealing the deal. "You made the right choice for your people, Lady Vizsla."
"And you made the right choice for yours, *Mand'alor*," Verde replied, donning her helmet. She pulled out a datapad and flipped it over to Boba. "My people won't work side-by-side with yours, but we will use our contacts to fight the Yuuzhan Vong our way. That datapad has all the information about the fleet currently at Bandomeer. It was from a Peace Brigade officer we managed to get drunk. Good luck."
"You as well," Boba remarked, likewise donning his own helmet.

Only when his helmet was on did he allow himself to smirk. He had read her correctly the moment she had stepped off of her shuttle. If what was on the datapad was true, it was clear that Verde had also anticipated a peaceful end to their conflict. She may have been a young leader, but she had also realized what several decades of fighting had done to those who followed her family name. The lack of any actual debate or haggling over the terms of an alliance was more evidence that she too had wanted the fighting to stop. The only thing that had kept her from asking outright for a peace was her desire to save her people's pride and honor. They were, after all, still Mandalorians. Depending on what she did now, the *Kyr'tsad* really did have a chance to change.

Verde turned back to her people and pumped a fist in the air. *"Oya, Kyr'tsad. Mhi gana Vongese kaymarur!" Let's hunt, Death Watch. We have Vong to kill.*

The Death Watch Mandalorians picked up their weapons, gathered back into their ship, and took off.

Sannah continued to blink, unable to believe what had just happened. She hadn't known what to expect. And the meeting's end was sort of anticlimactic in a way. After everything she had heard of the Death Watch, she had expected more of a fight, of a promise of blood for the sake of peace, or something more dramatic along those lines. It was hard to believe that after two speeches, 'poof,' peace between the two peoples had been achieved. They had spent more time traveling to the planet than actually standing on it. Tyria grinned broadly at Sannah's completely bemused and stunned expression, resting an affectionate arm around the young teen. "Great job. Sannah."

Sannah's mouth moved soundlessly, invoking an amused chuckle from Boba Fett. "What your Master said, Melodie. It's things like this that continue to make me give you Jedi a chance after all." The leader of the Supercommandos looked to Tyria. "We'll see you back on Raxis Prime and then evacuate it before the Vong get there. After that, we'll finalize our attack plans on Bandomeer."

"Sure thing," Tyria nodded.

"Oh," Boba paused, pulled out a vibroblade with a shimmering black blade, and handed it to Sannah. It was a little shorter than a sword, but longer than a knife. Carved into the handle was Boba's name in Mando'a script. "Your boyfriend told me you wanted and autograph. Will this do?"

Sannah's jaw dropped and she nodded mutely, cradling the blade reverently. She didn't even see Boba shake his head in silent laughter, or hear the rest of the Supercommandos and the Mandalore delegation

depart in their own ships. Finally, she looked up, smiling at Tyria with a broad grin, her yellow eyes alight with joy. Maybe the day hadn't been as bad as she thought it would be.

=}III{= =}III{=

Jaina Solo was in the middle of a very interesting confrontation of her own. Apparently, as the temporary Assistant Syndic of the Chiss Expansionary Defense Forces, Jag had ordered recently promoted Major Irolia and a good portion of the forces under her command to not only escort Jaina back to Galactic Alliance space, but to help the Galactic Alliance fight the Yuuzhan Vong threat as well.

But what surprised Jaina more was that Major Irolia was the same age as her. Though Jaina had commanded snubfighter squadrons, and even a Yuuzhan Vong frigate, Major Irolia was in charge of two forces of Clawcraft, one of the remaining Chiss Star Destroyers, and three Chiss frigates. The heavy burden of duty was due to that fact that the relatively young Chiss commander was from one of the most prestigious lines of the Nuruodo Ruling Family; above even Shawnkyr's position. So prestigious that the promotion seemed more of something that was expected instead of a surprise. From speaking with the Chiss following the newly minted major, Jaina got the sense that Irolia's father was a *very* high ranking Chiss official. She also felt, however, that Irolia would be the last person to elaborate on that. In fact, as adherent to duty as Chiss were, Irolia seemed grateful for the opportunity to leave Chiss space.

Jaina had set her course towards Imperial space to reunite with the rest of her family and was fortunate enough to run into Taan and the Freed One's primary battle fleet. Or rather, one of their dovin basal mines dragged her group out of hyperspace before they crossed the border into Imperial space. Of course, after everything Major Irolia and the Chiss had just been through, finding themselves in the middle of Yuuzhan Vong fleet wasn't the preferred situation they wanted to be in.

"Stand down!" Jaina said firmly into the comm, seeing the Chiss vessels move into attack formation. "Major Irolia, stand down! These Yuuzhan Vong are friendly."

"*Friendly, Colonel Solo?"*

"Friendly," Jaina confirmed, holding her breath as the force of three Chiss squadrons slowed their approach on the nearest capital ship. "These are the Freed Yuuzhan Vong."

"*We'll follow your lead, Colonel."*

Jaina exhaled. "Thank you, Major."

She still waited until the Chiss Star Destroyer, frigates, and force of Chiss Clawcraft pulled back, though, before finally slumping in her

seat. The last thing she wanted was allies firing on each other. "Major, are you willing to join me on the command ship? Perhaps we can figure out what is occurring within the Remnant."
"*Join you…on the Vong ship, ma'am?*"
"It won't be that bad. Taan's great," Jaina said reassuringly.
"*If you're sure, Colonel.*" The young Chiss major sounded as if she had just been given a death sentence. Jaina supposed that no amount of training would prepare someone for going onto a ship of a species that had come within a hairsbreadth of destroying your own people. It was a testament to the major's braveness when her Clawcraft flew alongside Jaina's X-wing without another moment's hesitation.
Unlike Galactic Alliance or Imperial leaders, the Chiss were not averse to having their commanders in snubfighters in the thick of things. They had a more 'lead from the front' type of attitude, which helped them gain the loyalty and respect of those they brought into battle. It was risky, but then again, only those with skill and the ability to lead were promoted to ranks of leadership.
The two small fighters approached the massive Matalok, the *Blessed by the Jedi*, the alien coral hull rushing by them. At one time, such close proximity to one of the strongest Yuuzhan Vong ships would have made Jaina break out into a sweat and cause her pulse to skyrocket. How quickly the times had changed.
She couldn't believe that she actually looked forward to boarding the vessel and greeting the newly made leader of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong.
A membrane like door parted, allowing the two fighters to enter. Both docked on several pads of yorik coral that had obviously been designed to accept mechanical snubfighters. The Freed Shapers had evidently been hard at work once more. Since coralskippers normally attached themselves to the outside hull of their motherships, there really was no place for an X-wing or Clawcraft to land. The Freed Shapers had apparently converted one of the larger 'airlocks' into a makeshift hangar bay for the less organically inclined vessels.
Jaina and Irolia emerged from their vessels, with the Chiss keeping a white-knuckled grip on her service weapon.
"Hey, it'll be okay, major," Jaina smiled reassuringly. "Taan and her people are one of the main reasons why the Galactic Alliance has been having so much success recently. They're good people."
Irolia just nodded, her red eyes scanning the very alien hangar bay around her. A membrane door to the room opened, and a group of Yuuzhan Vong passed through it. Irolia tensed once more, fighting the urge to grip her blaster. Despite her anxiety, she noted Jaina's relaxed posture and forced herself to mimic it.

In the meantime, Jaina held up a welcoming hand towards the delegation. "Supreme Leader Taan."
Taan made a face and countered perfectly. "Yun-Harla."
Jaina laughed and bowed politely. "Might I introduce Major Hess'irolia'nuruodo, of the Chiss."
Irolia, looking to Jaina's actions for the proper protocol, likewise bowed solemnly. "Supreme Leader."
Had the young major been looking up, she would have seen the scowl Taan was directing in Jaina's direction. Evidently, after spending most of her life as a Shamed One, Taan was still a bit overwhelmed by the deference all the other Yuuzhan Vong were showing her. "Rise, Major." Taan motioned. "And welcome. I am glad that Yun-Harla managed to gain more allies for our cause."
"Yun-Harla?" Irolia looked to Jaina in confusion. Irolia might have been an elite soldier from a notable family within the Chiss Ascendancy, but outside those boundary and discipline of Chiss society, she was fairly lost.
"A good portion of the Yuuzhan Vong see me as an avatar of one of their goddesses," Jaina said dryly. Her brown eyes darted sideways to the Yuuzhan Vong leader. "And I'll stop calling you Supreme Leader if you never refer to me as Yun-Harla ever again."
Taan smiled and tilted her head. "Of course. But if there are any priests around, I'm afraid I'll have to show you the respect they believe you deserve."
Jaina blinked suspiciously. "Wait, did you just insult me?"
"I would be much too terrified of incurring Yun-Harla's wrath to do such a thing," Taan said, looking aghast.
"Taan," Jaina chuckled, shaking her head in amusement.
"Yes, Jaina?"
"No matter how tiresome being the leader of your people gets, don't ever change."
"I will try not to, Jaina Solo," Taan said. And then her smile faded slightly. "It is a good thing one of our dovin basal mines managed to drag you out of hyperspace when it did."
"Yeah, that was rather unexpected." Jaina nodded. They made their way to a small room off to the side. "What are the mines for?"
"I've had my people create a loose blockade of Remnant space at the moment," Taan said. "Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong have had much success against this 'Empire.' The sector you were heading for has already been captured by elements of Domain Vorrik."
"That's a new name," Jaina remarked. All the while, Irolia remained silent, learning as much as she possibly could.

"Domain Vorrik is a smaller domain," Taan said, taking a seat on a bed of polyp-like material. "Equivalent to your Special Forces. From what Shaeri has been able to tell us over her villip, Vorrik has conquered half of the Empire's territory. They have begun destroying your HoloNet beacons, so villip is the only way we can communicate. We were in fact discussing whether or not we should come to the aid the Jedi when you arrived."
"I can still feel them all in the Force," Jaina said slowly, after quickly reaching out to her family. "And they don't feel panicked or desperate, so we still have some time. Have Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong attempted to send reinforcements?"
"At the moment, no. But the Peace Brigade has made several attempts to run our blockade. We have a brig full of them at the moment."
"And their ships?"
"We have them too," Taan nodded. "Seven of them. Their captains surrendered to us when they realized that we weren't the allies they thought we were."
"You wouldn't also happen to have the *Trickster* with you, would you?" Jaina smiled.
"Your brothers insisted we bring it along in case, I believe Anakin said, 'you finished early and decided to join them on their family outing.' Falhar and its crew are standing by as we speak."
"Major Irolia," Jaina looked to the Chiss major. "We're going to need your people's help."
"We are ready, Colonel," Irolia said with a curt nod.
"With Taan's permission," Jaina looked to the Yuuzhan Vong leader, who nodded in turn. "My brothers invited me to join the family, and I have every intention of doing so. Here's what we're going to do..."
=}IV{= =}IV{=
Danni Quee let out a groan as she plopped back into her bunk aboard the Imperial Star Destroyer *Defiant*; part of what was left of Moff Flennic's sector fleet and currently docked on the Imperial stronghold planet of Marquarra. Danni knew that she wasn't a very good soldier or a Jedi, but she knew she was a damned good scientist. And boy did the Imperials need one more than ever. The lack of knowledge their tacticians and scientists had about Yuuzhan Vong biots—even with all their intelligence reports and information Leia had given to them during her first visit—was frightening. It had almost been like the New Republic all over again, with the frontline fighters finding out the hard way what did and didn't work against these alien invaders.
Morale was also at an all-time low. The lightning fast and extremely efficient way the Yuuzhan Vong had cut off the Empire from its primary

shipyards forced the Imperials to make do with whatever ships left they had in service. Of course, with two Moffs on the run, and three sectors fallen in a matter of hours, the other Moffs were scrambling to defend their own territories.

Danni took several steadying breaths. The Yuuzhan Vong had been all too skilled at manipulating the Moffs' feelings and decisions. Just like the invaders had with the New Republic, they had left the Empire as pockets of isolated resistance, easily wiped out with minimal fuss. Destroying the long-range holo-comm buoys had a killed any communication between the sectors and the capital, further adding to the state of disarray.

Of course, Danni mused, they just had to get one of the more competent Yuuzhan Vong commanders in charge of this invasion. Any other lackluster, battle-ready warrior would have charged straight for Bastion in the standard 'cut-off-the-head' tactic. B'shith Vorrik, as Shaeri had already pointed out, was far from the average commander. It was clear he had meticulously planned the invasion of the Remnant; had had his agents in place long before the first Yuuzhan Vong ships had even arrived. The Vorrik battle fleet may have been smaller than most, but B'shith knew what to do to get the most out of what he had. She had heard the reports. Despite the efforts of Jan, Kyle, Jaden, and their Imperial liaison officer, the Clacis sector, had fallen due to the high level of Yuuzhan Vong operatives already working in the sector. A Yuuzhan Vong warlord had been hiding behind a Peace Brigade front to export the sector's population as slaves and had compromised the local governments at every level. The local Imperials who had tried to fight had simply been overwhelmed and outmatched, but the Galactic Alliance trio had stayed behind to help organize a resistance. The irony of which was not lost on anyone; a former Imperial becoming a Rebel, returning to help Imperials become rebels.

The Velcar Sector Fleet had been duped into chasing out its own Moff, and then poorly repositioned by the infiltrator in the chain of command. After a few reports and well placed Yuuzhan Vong agents caused the captains of the ships to doubt one and other, no one had moved to act when elements of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet began to pick off the isolated fleet units. Most of the Imperials had been wiped out before they even knew what had hit them. The rest had rallied around the *Errant Venture* and Luke Skywalker and had retreated to Moff Crowal's neighboring sector.

And lastly, the sector she was now in, the Prefsbelt, had been reduced to a quarter of its strength before anyone had even known what was happening. The forces defending Yaga Minor had been completely

caught off guard by the Yuuzhan Vong fleet, and the element of surprise had worked all too well. The shipyards were lost, most of the sector was lost, and now the survivors had holed up at Marquarra; the last garrison planet within the sector. Moff Flennic, who had been staunchly opposed to helping the New Republic the first time around, had now seen the error of his ways and was coordinating with Leia, Han, Shaeri, and Kyp, to help keep the rest of his people alive.

A difficult task for more reasons than one.

With the loss of Moff Rosset's Velcar sector, Moff Flennic's fleet now lay between two hostile territories and the Unknown Regions. With only five Star Destroyers left, most of them older models, and a handful of support craft, they were lucky the Yuuzhan Vong were more concerned with consolidating their own gains first rather than pressing forward with an all-out elimination.

Fortunately, Maquarra happened to be the regional headquarters for Imperial Intelligence, and they had a lot of supplies on hand. Danni had just spent the better part of the last two thirty-hour days helping a team of Imperial engineers and scientists construct a yammosk jammer from scratch. When she hadn't been supervising, she had been giving lectures to the Imperial agents and other scientists about the various biots used by the Yuuzhan Vong. And when she wasn't doing either of those things, she was consulting with another team of Imperial scientists regarding the grove of baffor trees that had been transplanted from Yaga Minor. Knowing from Jacen and Corran that the Yuuzhan Vong vonduun crab armor was allergic to the pollen of the trees, she and the scientists were working on a way to weaponize it in case ground forces tried to invade.

Unfortunately, all of that meant that Danni had had very little time to eat, sleep, or doing anything that made her feel even remotely human. She didn't ever think she'd grow tired of science, but it was moments like this when she wished for a nice secure laboratory with unlimited resources, somewhere non-violent and without the threat of imminent death hanging over her head. Science was much more fun if death, her own or others', wasn't part of the equation.

The chime to her quarters rang, and like a zombie, Danni rose from her bunk and staggered to her door. It slid open to reveal one of the younger Imperial scientists, a clean-shaven man about her age, holding a steaming cup of caf.

"Figured you could use this," the scientist said.

Danni groaned and took the cup. "What's going on now, Sanix?"

Sanix Fous, born on Yaga Minor, had been raised with the holovids showing the 'golden years' of the Empire. Despite this, he was part of

the younger generation of Imperials who believed that the time of the Empire had passed, and he was not averse to going against the wishes of the old-guard. "Sorry for this, really. But the older scientists analyzed the Yuuzhan Vong tissue samples you managed to get sent to us and discovered…well…let's just say Ysanne Isard wasn't the only one with a monopoly on bioweapons."
Danni rubbed at her eyes and tried to let the caffeine of her drink wake her up a little more. "I'm sorry, Sanix. I know you've been up a while too, but my head kind of stopped working after the …" Danni wearily glanced back at the chronometer in her room. "How many times has that clock shown those numbers?"
"Since you arrived? About five times," Sanix said, the bags under his eyes revealing a similar strain on his own body. There was nothing like the imminent threat of a Yuuzhan Vong attack to motivate you. And the science corps was under more pressure than ever. The soldiers and ships may do the fighting, but it was up to the science corps to even the odds.
"Oh Force," Danni groaned again, tilting her head from side to side and hearing the tendons in her neck pop. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"
"The senior scientists are developing a bioweapon that only targets lifeforms with a certain genetic marker. This marker can be found only in life imported from the Yuuzhan Vong's home galaxy," Sanix repeated tiredly. "I tried to convince them that resorting to older Imperial methods would never work, but they're desperate. I'm hoping you can say something otherwise."
With the caf barely helping her, Danni began walking. "I'll try. But if they wouldn't listen to one of their own people. What makes you think they'd listen to me?"
"Wishful thinking?" Sanix tried wearily. "It doesn't help that two of the scientists are Chiss. Those people take Imperial doctrines to a whole new level. Moff Flennic gave full approval for this project, with an added permission to make the virus as lethal to the Yuuzhan Vong as possible. The older scientists are already calling it Omega Blue, the final solution."
Danni shuddered. Without any of the moral safeguards the Galactic Alliance scientists had, the dangerous creations the smartest Imperial minds could come up with could be both amazing, but also frightening.
"A bioweapon is *never* a solution." Danni said in a low voice.
"I'll probably be executed for treason for telling you this," Sanix chuckled, the lack of sleep likewise affecting him. "But I won't have genocide on my conscience."

The two walked swiftly through the halls of the Star Destroyer, leaving through a side hatch and stepping out onto the Marquarra's surface. The science facility was only a short hike away, a nondescript, windowless building that could have been a large storage shed for all intents and purposes. The surrounding land was about as lackluster as the building, gray rocky soil, with larger grey boulders for accents. The majority of the facility was deep underground. It was, after all, an Imperial Intelligence base of operations.

The first sign that things weren't going to go so well, however, occurred when Sanix's keycard failed to grant him access into the building.

The second sign was the battalion of stormtroopers that seemed to appear out of nowhere and surround them.

Both scientists startled, but also resigned, exchanged wry glances with each other. They were far too tired to be nervous.

The door to the facility opened, and two men, one human and one Chiss, emerged.

"Lieutenant Sanix Fous," the human said mildly.

"Director Ravis," Sanix inclined his head.

"What part of top-secret did you not understand?"

"Sir, almost all of what we know is information provided to us by Danni Quee. It felt wrong to leave her out after everything she's done for us."

"Feelings have no place in a war," the balding, yet muscular director said tersely. "The New Republic nearly collapsed because of their feelings. They were soft. We are not."

"And what will happen if the Yuuzhan Vong learn of the bioweapon?" Danni spoke out. "They are far better experts at bio-tech than we are. Suppose they repurpose it to kill off all humans? What do you think that will do to your human-centric Empire?"

"We have safeguards in effect to keep that from happening. As this project is classified, I'm afraid I will have to keep the two of you detained until it is completed and deployed."

"You *aren't* deploying that weapon," Danni said in a low voice. "And no safeguard will stop the Yuuzhan Vong. They are probably days, if not hours away from attacking this system. When they use their creatures to bore down into the labs, what do you think they'll find? You will have just handed them the perfect weapon to turn the tide of the war."

"All the more reason we must kill them all first."

"Listen Nerf-for-brains!" Danni snapped. "I've had less than two hours of sleep, haven't had a shower in three days, haven't eaten a proper meal in five! I may not be a full-fledged Jedi, but I will *not* allow you to commit mass murder on an entire species! We have Yuuzhan Vong

allies, we have gained beneficial technologies from the information they have! People can change if given the chance, and I'll damn well be sure that the rest of them have that same chance we gave our allies. We're scientists! We're supposed to be helping people with our knowledge, not planning genocide!"
"You are wasting your breath," Director Ravis said coldly. "I have my orders from Moff Flennic himself. Your Rebel tactics and ideals obviously didn't work, so now it is time for the more efficient Imperial methods. We will do what your people were too scared of. We thank you for the information you have given us, but your advice is no longer needed."
Danni's green eyes blazed at the dismissal and she tossed her long blond hair over her shoulder as she walked right up to the taller man. She didn't care about the dozens of blaster rifles raised in her direction. What the director was proposing wasn't science at all, just mass murder under the guise of science.
"Oh it's needed, *Director*. You're a smart man. You may have your orders, but I know you're also capable of thinking for yourself. You may think you've found the final solution to this war, but your people have only just begun fighting it. The Galactic Alliance, the New Republic, have been fighting the Yuuzhan Vong for three years now. We *know* how they think and how they will react. They razed entire systems for a single, perceived slight."
"I don't see how this is rele…"
Danni cut him off, holding a hand up as the frustration and exhaustion sent her over the boiling point. "You think things in the Empire are bad now? Wait until you start using that bioweapon. Sure you may kill several thousand, but the Yuuzhan Vong will unleash every single nasty they have, things even *we* haven't seen yet, on your most populated worlds. Forget slave labor. Every Imperial citizen they capture, man, woman, and child, will be subjected to the most brutal experiments you can fathom. They will have no reason to hold back, no reason to show mercy or preserve your worlds. And then, all it takes is for one of them to develop an immunity, and their Shaping will render that bioweapon of yours harmless. They'll use that bioweapon for themselves and reverse the progress being made by the Galactic Alliance and the rest of the galaxy. If you truly want to bring an end to your vaunted 'Empire,' to every free system in this galaxy, by all means, use that bioweapon. But don't hide behind the 'I was following orders' excuse. No order in this universe, no situation, will *ever* justify that weapon's use!"

The bald scientist regarded Danni silently for several long moments. The surrounding stormtroopers remained at the ready, but were shifting uncomfortably. Even then, Director Ravis shook his head slowly.
"Fancy rhetoric sounds good, but they won't stop the Yuuzhan Vong," Director Ravis said, his voice subdued. "Your people fought the Yuuzhan Vong for three years, and what is the result? Trillions lay dead. You have only just begun to fight them to a standstill. The Empire can't afford that. We have to do what's best for our people. *You* must understand that, Danni Quee. We must make it so that the Yuuzhan Vong will think long and hard before invading the Empire again. They will take systems, but we have to make them bleed for every planet they take. This isn't an option that's palpable for anyone, but we have no other choice."
"There's always another option, Director," Danni said.
"I do not see one. The Imperial Fleet has already been reduced to two-thirds its strength, and we haven't even gotten off a shot yet. By your own admission, Yuuzhan Vong infiltrators are present in our fleet and government at the highest levels. We have lost Yaga Minor, our only shipyards. The Empire does not have the resources as your Galactic Alliance. We cannot afford a prolonged war or further losses, and hope to continue to function. Only now do our leaders even consider allying with your government, but it may be too little too late. I did not lead this science division for over twenty years, only to see the only life I know go down in flames. Moff Flennic feels the same way. This is *our* home, Jedi Quee. *Our* way of life. You have already lost your homes, had your life disrupted, we have no desire to give up what we fought so hard to build."
"You've already had one Empire built on genocide. That Empire fell and was re-founded on Bastion. Do you really want this empire to have a history of genocide too?" Danni said softly, finally understanding his view. She took a step back and let her hands fall to her sides passively. She understood, the director was afraid, just like most of the Imperials were. They had stood by and watched as the Yuuzhan Vong decimated the New Republic, razed Coruscant and destroyed entire moons. The Yuuzhan Vong, for the last three years, had been monsters that went bump in the night. Something that the Empire knew existed but had tried to ignore for the sake of their own preservation. Now these monsters were real, and the reality was enough to shatter even the bravest of soldiers. They had a right to be fearful. Danni only hoped she could stop them from doing something everyone would regret.

"Is your desire to survive so great that you're willing to sacrifice millions of lives, some of them innocent? At least consider other alternatives, director. Please. I'll even talk with Moff Flennic if it will help. But this weapon isn't the answer. It *isn't* too late for the Galactic Alliance and the Empire to be allies. If we work together, we can stop the Yuuzhan Vong."
Ravis's face betrayed nothing. "You will have your meeting with Moff Flennic. I will not promise that we won't use this weapon, but I can say that instead perhaps the weapon will not be as final a solution as some of us might like."
Danni exhaled loudly in relief and offered a small smile of condolence. "Thank you, Director."
"Let us pray your optimism and softness haven't doomed us all." Ravis remarked. He made a dismissing motion to the stormtroopers and they holstered their blasters. He turned back towards the research facility. "Moff Flennic will inform you of the meeting time, Danni Quee. You might as well go with her, Lieutenant Fous. It is clear where *your* loyalties lie."
=}V{= =}V{=
"They're coming," Jacen said in a low voice, his eyes closed as he sat on the bridge of the *Victory II*-class Star Destroyer, the *Protector.*
Moff Ephin Sarreti nodded. "Send an alert to all ships to stand-by for an engagement. Deploy fighters. Inform the *Peerless* to ready the second units."
The bridge of the *Protector* was suddenly full of action as the officers went about to carry out the orders.
"Jedi Solo, do we know how large the enemy fleet is?"
Jacen concentrated, making himself fairly small in order to extend his senses out through the stars. "Smaller than our fleet."
"Truly?" Sarreti paused in surprise. The Imperial fleet guarding Muunilinst had been divided into two segments, each with ten Star Destroyers and a sundry of supporting vessels.
Fifteen of the twenty Star Destroyers were the latest *Imperial*-class, with weapons, engines, and shield upgrades. The other five were revamped *Victory II*-class Star Destroyers. It was a fearsome armada that would have given anyone pause. The morale among the crews was high. They had full confidence that they would be able to stop this foreign threat before the Vong made their way any further into the Empire.
"I'm sensing at least eight ships the size of capital ships, a bunch of smaller support vessels," Jacen confirmed with a frown. "But there's

something odd about them, they're not the usual ships. Maybe the Yuuzhan Vong are trying out some new ship we haven't seen before."
"In any case, good work. At least we don't have to worry about the numbers," Sarreti exhaled.
In the background, fighter units continued to launch.
"This is Death Knight Leader, the One-Eighty-Ones have finished launching. My people have the lead."
"Vong-Girl here, One-Twenty-Eights are behind me and ready to go."
"Colonel Vessery, Interloper and Stranger squadrons will follow your instructions, Protector."
Ephin Sarreti stared out of the bridge windows as the fighters formed up in front of the ten-capital ships like a protective screen. At the front of each of the TIE squadrons was an X-wing piloted by one of the Jedi. To make up for the lack of any Jedi squadrons, it was their hope that Jacen could appropriately guide these lead fighters making use of the battlemeld. The TIE pilots had been ordered to follow the instructions of the Jedi during the battle. Whether it would work or not remained to be seen.
"All fighters have cleared the hangar bay."
"First Fleet standing by."
"Remember, fighting retreat, people," Moff Sarreti said under his breath. "Jedi Solo, any changes?"
"None, and that's what's worrying me," Jacen muttered. "The Yuuzhan Vong wouldn't normally do this. Wait…there's a second wave of enemy, also numbering at eight capital ships, five minutes behind the first."
"You still don't sound happy."
"From what I've heard of Domain Vorrik, they don't seem to be the type to feed their people in piece-meal," Jacen said with a shake of his head. "I have a bad feeling about this."
"We'll pull back our forces once we see what these Vong have to offer," Moff Sarreti replied, focusing on the field of stars outside.
And then the Yuuzhan Vong emerged from hyperspace. But it was not what anyone had expected. The ships burst out of hyperspace, and a series of explosions seemed to engulf them, sending shredded and burnt layers of yorik coral flying everywhere. For a moment, everyone was stunned. Had the ships blown themselves up coming out of hyperspace?
But then something truly terrifying suddenly tore through the cloud of smoke and debris. The eight capital ships Jacen had detected were not capital ships at all. But massive, moon-sized asteroids covered in yorik-coral and propelled by large clusters of dovin basals. The support ships

he had picked up were countless, fighter-sized pieces of space-rock likewise equipped with dovin basals. These ballistic objects continued on forward at frightening speeds, pulling g-forces that even TIE Interceptors couldn't hope to match.

"Emperor's Bones!" Moff Sarreti gasped. "Evasive maneuvers, now!"

Klaxon alarms rang out throughout the ship as the Star Destroyers of First Fleet frantically tried to avoid these high-velocity projectiles. Not all of them were successful.

As the *Protector* veered sharply, those on the bridge could see one Star Destroyer, the *Superior,* erupt in a brilliant fireball as it was dashed against the massive asteroid. Another asteroid decapitated the bridge tower of the *Invincible*, while the maneuvers of a third Star Destroyer inadvertently caused it to ram through its own fighter cover.

Two more Star Destroyers had collided trying to swing out of the path of another one of the eight asteroids, and the asteroid plowed straight through their dying remains. The frigates, dreadnaughts and light cruisers in support didn't fare well either as they too were decimated and smashed against the large, unyielding pieces of speeding space rock. The smaller rocks utterly smashed through whatever was in their way, punching holes through capital ships or completely obliterating individual fighters. It was pure pandemonium as everyone frantically maneuvered around a hailstorm of rocks and ship debris.

But the Yuuzhan Vong weren't done with their surprises yet. With the asteroids now positioned directly in the middle of the Imperial fleet, they detonated, sending Star Destroyer-sized chunks of space rock flying in all directions at hyper-velocity. Two Star Destroyers were destroyed instantly as their shields were unable to cope with the massive debris. Another had its front half sheared off.

The casualties inflicted on the support ships and fighter squadrons were immense, as the shrapnel from the smaller space rocks took out entire squadrons of unshielded TIE fighters at a time. Larger rocks decimated the frigates, with one piece of rocky shrapnel shredding a dreadnaught in two. Another fragment slammed into the engines and caused a chain-reaction that completely annihilated a fleeing support cruiser. Within the blink of an eye, without a single shot fired, the awaiting Imperial force had been reduced to a floating field of metal scrap and bodies.

The *Protector* shuddered violently as its hull was pock-marked with pieces of flying rock; one such piece slamming into the vessel just below the bridge tower, and another embedding itself mid-ship.

And then it got worse. Before the surviving Imperials could recover, the Yuuzhan Vong truly arrived in the form of five Matalok heavy cruisers and three battleship equivalents.
"Fall back!" Moff Sarreti yelled as the Vong fleet closed in and opened fire.
The Imperial line was in complete disarray.
"Jedi Solo, if we want to make it out of here alive, we have to call in Second Fleet!"
"Do it!" Jacen said, mentally trying to keep in contact with the Death Knights and Tahiri. Both the 181st and the TIE Interceptors of the 128th were still in the fight and he tried to direct them out of danger before they were caught without any capital ship support. Without hyperdrives, none of the TIEs would be able to escape on their own.
The second group of ten Star Destroyers emerged out of hyperspace and began immediate maneuvers to relieve the beleaguered First Fleet. Even then, the eight-strong Yuuzhan Vong capital ship force didn't appear at all fazed. They unleashed a wave of coralskippers and advanced straight towards the newly arrived Star Destroyers behind their fighter screen, all the while firing on the ships of the First Fleet. One of the surviving Star Destroyers succumbed to the deadly volley of plasma, and escape pods flew out on all sides as it began to break apart.
It wasn't a battle, it was a slaughter.
The captains of the Second Fleet did their best to provide cover fire, but the Yuuzhan Vong seemed intent on making them blink as they kept their high-speed collision course.
The Yuuzhan Vong were in tight formation, their void defenses overlapping and soaking up the turbolaser fire and missile barrages being launched at them. The coralskippers made run after run through the unshielded TIE fighter escort, massacring the pilots who were unused to facing Yuuzhan Vong craft.
The ship shuddered again. The *Protector* and the remaining surviving Star Destroyer of First Fleet were still trapped behind enemy lines, so to speak. The almost reckless charge of the Yuuzhan Vong vessels had positioned the alien invaders between the two Imperial fleets. Not that it mattered anymore. One of the Star Destroyers that had tried to stand its ground found the bulk of the Yuuzhan Vong Matalok boring right through its bridge. Bits and pieces of coral broke off in the collision, but it was clear that the Star Destroyer had received the brunt of the damage. That was all it took for the rest of the Imperial captains to blink, frantically moving their ships out of the way of the seemingly suicidal maneuver.

The Yuuzhan Vong continued their punishing attack. Their heavy plasma weaponry decimated two of the out-of-position Star Destroyers from the Second Fleet. Coralskippers making runs on the capital ship began targeting the very obvious bridge towers. It was clear that the Yuuzhan Vong had been well briefed about the design of the Imperial vessels by their spies. One by one, bridge-deflector shield generators began exploding like popped bubbles. Several coralskippers made suicidal runs straight through the bridge windows, downing the massive ships many times their size.

Like an armored battalion on land, once the Yuuzhan Vong had the momentum, they continued to push right on through. Within minutes of the engagement's start, seventeen Star Destroyers, dozens of support craft, and hundreds of fighters, laid in complete ruin.

The remaining Star Destroyers and their escort began to limp out of the system, its equally ravaged fighter squadrons following in their wake. The Vong commander of the eight-ship fleet had his ships fire waves of plasma at the retreating vessels, but they did not pursue. The Imperials had fought a fighting retreat, but not on the terms they thought they would be fighting on.

=}VI{= =}VI{=

Almost simultaneously, in the Ord Thoden system, Anakin Solo awaited the assault from the Vong fleet out of the Carrion sector. Standing with him on the Star Destroyer *Chimaera*, at the head of a fleet of twenty-five Star Destroyers, was Grand Admiral Pellaeon. Without long-range communications, it was impossible to know what was transpiring at Muunilinst at the time, so the forces present were blissfully ignorant as to the disaster that had befallen the other half of the fleet.

Imperial Intelligence suggested that the Vong had attacked the Empire with a compliment of twenty-four or so capital-ships, but that number was hard to confirm. Even then, with the need to garrison various systems and maintain watch on any outside incursion, it was doubtful the Vong could bring more than ten capital ships to bear at a time. The Imperials were all too confident that they could repel the invaders with the might of the Imperial Navy.

"Media-Boy here. TIE Defenders of Delta squadron are ready."

"Jade Shadow in position to assist." Mara finished up the fleet-wide check-in.

Though Anakin wasn't capable of sensing the Yuuzhan Vong from afar, like his brother was, he was very efficient when they were in the same system. Unfortunately, that meant that the Imperial forces were not aware as to the size of the enemy approaching. Also unfortunate was the fact that Anakin wasn't able to fully maintain his Force-enhanced

Vongsense. There were just too few Jedi in the area for him to properly anchor himself in the Force. At best, he could provide information to the rest of the Imperials seconds at a time as his enhanced Vongsense wavered off and on.
Despite all the preparation, imagine, to the surprise of the Imperial Navy, when a large convoy of civilian vessels was dragged out of hyperspace by the fleet's Interdictor cruisers. Over ten ships, each a large sized transport, began a slow course towards the Imperial fleet.
"Receiving a hail from the lead ship. They're claiming to be refugees fleeing the Vong out of the Carrion sector," a comm-officer reported.
"Jedi Solo, do we have Vong?"
Anakin very slowly shook his head. "No…it's strange though. I know for certain that there is some type of Yuuzhan Vong life on those ships, but not on any sentient scale. There aren't any warriors or disguised Vong. The refugees are all human."
"I want these ship quarantined away from the fleet," Pellaeon ordered. "Have some of our fighter squadrons escort them through…"
"Sir! They're speeding up! It looks like they're trying to run straight through our position. They are ignoring our hails."
"Blast it! All ships, open fire!"
The flimsy shielded, unarmed and unarmored massive transport vessels didn't stand a chance as they were shredded one by one. Eventually, the only things left were the burnt out hulks of the vessels and lots and lots of bodies.
"What are the Vong trying to do?" The grand admiral muttered, staring murderously at the thousands of refugee bodies now floating in space in front of the fleet.
"Sir, another ten ships are dropping out of hyperspace. Communications reports that these vessels are similar make and model, claiming refugees on board."
Pellaeon's jaw clenched. "Tell those vessels to hold their position. Warn them that we will fire on them if they approach."
"The ships are accelerating."
"Fire."
Just like the previous ten vessels, these four appeared to disappear in the barrage of green. More bodies spilled out into space, forming a morbid graveyard.
"Another ship has just arrived, sir," the comm-officer said, his voice subdued. "It's a Yuuzhan Vong vessel."
"Just one ship?"
"Yes, sir."
"Receiving open-channel transmission…"

Rather than a Yuuzhan Vong voice, however, the gathered Imperial fleet began to hear panicked screams and cries.
"This is Gelda Control, we're being overrun! Oh god, they're here! No! Don't...!"
"Endoraan Control, is there any Imperial forces in the area, we need help! Please! They're slaughtering us out here!"
"*Fighters are down, our capital ship support is gone. Emperor help us, they're glassing the planet!"*
"This is Captain Moran of the Star Destroyer Victorious, we've taken heavy damage, losing atmosphere! Is there anyone in the area that can assist? Repeat, we need assistance! We're going to impact with the planet if we can't get them to stop firing on our engines!"
"We've lost all fighter support, it's hopeless! Pull back, pull back!"
"All major population centers are in flames! Casualties are in the hundred-millions! Requesting immediate reinforcements! Urgent, we need reinforcements!"
"Transmission from Gelda Prime, they've lost planetary defense shields! Hundreds of thousands dead in the first volley alone!"
"*Admiral Vaeri's ship was taken out in that last wave! All forces, prepare a full retreat!"*
"Imperial High Command, Imperial High Command, do you read? We request assistance im...."
"*The Redoubt was just destroyed, what in the blazes are these things?"*
"*The entire planet's burning! There's nothing left!"*
"*Command, we've thrown everything we've had at them, but we just can't stop them!"*
"Besellia control to Yuuzhan Vong force, please stop firing! We surrender! We surrender! Please sto...."
"Turn it off," Pellaeon growled. His pale-faced crew did as they were told. "I want a targeting solution on that vessel, now!"
"Sir, it's fallen back. It placed some sort of comm-beacon which is continuing the broadcast over all channels, open and encrypted. It's severely hampering ship-to-ship communication."
"Seven ships have emerged in its place, sir! Configuration and analysis of the Galactic Alliance intel suggests that these are Vong-slave vessels."
"They're full," Anakin said, his voice uncharacteristically monotonous as he opened his eyes and moved to the window. "All seven of those ships have over two-hundred slaves onboard. Given what the Yuuzhan Vong are known for, and what they're doing now, they're probably going to vent their cargo."

"Vent the…" Even the grand admiral paled when he realized what Anakin was saying.
"Sir…" the sensor operator's voice trailed off.
Small clouds of atmosphere were released from the backs of the Slaveships as hundreds upon hundreds of bodies were added to the floating graveyard.
"Oh god, they're still moving," whispered one of the operators, seeing a close up of the ship's sensor reading.
"They're given an oxygen supply and a thin insulator so they don't suffocate or freeze to death immediately." Anakin looked away, a sick feeling in his stomach. In addition to the loss of life, out of all the possibilities, this type of attack was one he hadn't even considered. There had been so many ship-to-ship engagements, that psychological attacks were something that had slipped his mind.
The bridge was completely silent as the very visible barrier of bodies now floated between the Imperial Fleet and the retreating Yuuzhan Vong vessels. As the comm-officers attempted to speak over the constant reports of death and destruction occurring all around the Empire, a somber atmosphere settled over the bridge.
Minutes passed, but no further vessel, Yuuzhan Vong or otherwise, emerged. After an hour, it became clear that no other ship would appear.
"Well, the Yuuzhan Vong certainly attacked us," Pellaeon said softly. "Attacked us in a way we had no defense against. Leave a vanguard of ten Star Destroyers to secure this system, have the rest fall back to Bastion."
"Yes, sir."
Pellaeon inclined his head at an equally grim-looking Anakin. "Let's hope that your brother had better success than us."
=}VII{= =}VII{=
The *Kell Dragon* was only part way back to Raxis Prime when blinding pain jolted both its occupants. Sannah immediately threw up her last meal, while Tyria gritted her teeth and clenched the steering yoke violently.
"Doran," Sannah gasped out, clutching her chest.
"We're still over an hour out," Tyria whispered, her voice strained as she struggled to reach out to her son.
"He's still alive," Sannah breathed, her eyes squeezed shut and her fists balled tightly in her lap. "Right?"
"He is," Tyria confirmed.

"Can this ship go any faster?" Sannah's voice was just a touch away from pleading as she stared helplessly at the blue vortex of hyperspace.
Tyria reached into a side compartment and handed Sannah an environment suit, complete with its own oxygen supply. "Put it on."
"Tyria?"
Tyria was already changing into an environmental suit of her own. "My husband designed this ship to run and take a pounding, not to stay and fight. We can make point three past lightspeed if I divert all power to the engines. And I mean *all* power. Life support and gravity go offline, so strap yourself in and use the Force to trap the existing warmth around you."
Sannah swallowed, but then nodded resolutely and donned the environmental suit.
"I've never used what Kell called the 'get-the-heck-out-of-wherever-you-are-and-back-to-me-as-fast-as-you-can,' button before, so hang on," Tyria said, once the both of them were suited up and strapped in.
"Go already," Sannah said anxiously.
Tyria pressed a few more buttons, and the lights in the cockpit dimmed to almost non-existence. Sannah could feel it when the artificial gravity was turned off, and heard every other system shut down. There was an audible whine as the engines received a massive boost in power. In a fraction of a second, both Tyria and Sannah were pushed back into their chairs as the *Kell Dragon* lurched forward at nearly thrice its previous speed.
Even then, the next few minutes that passed seemed to stretch on for a painfully long time for the occupants of the heavily modified gunboat. There was no conversation, with the both of them preoccupied with the Force to reassure themselves of Doran's continued living.
Sannah hated it. Knowing only that he was alive and nothing else. Flashbacks to their recent adventure on Bakura left her with an even deeper pit in her stomach. For some reason, she had a feeling that this current adventure wasn't going to have such a happy end.
When they finally dropped out of hyperspace in orbit above Raxis Prime, the planet was a lot different than the one they had left. A scattering of debris floated about in space, the remains of Mandalorian *Gladiator*-class assault fighters and their *Pursuer*-class enforcement ship. Bodies of several of the pilots floated by. There were no survivors.
What riveted the attention of the two Jedi was the sight of where the training camp had once been. Even from orbit, the massive, still

glowing crater, was visible. The crater was as large as an entire city, leaving a sizable emptiness within the piles of scrap on the planet. Tyria quickly activated the comlink, broadcasting a code in Mando'a in hopes of finding at least *one* survivor. Only silence answered her hails. Worse yet, was that the two could sense Doran's presence grow ever fainter, as if the distance between them was increasing exponentially. For Sannah, it was trying to grip water in her bare hands. The hard she tried to hold onto Doran's presence, the further he seemed to grow.
"Coralskipper debris," Tyria said, her jaw clenched as the burnt out husk of a Yuuzhan Vong fighter floated pass.
"The Yuuzhan Vong," Sannah blanched. If Doran was still alive, but not on Raxis Prime, then that meant only one thing. He was now a prisoner of the Yuuzhan Vong. And given the track record the foreign invaders had with their Jedi prisoners, Doran's stay would not be enjoyable in the least. "We have to save him." Sannah said, panic filling her. She had seen firsthand what the Yuuzhan Vong had done to Tahiri. How they had tortured and shaped the older teen. Thoughts of Doran suffering a similar fate had her shaking in fear. "Tyria, we're going to save him, right?"
"We will," Tyria said firmly. "Once we know what happened here. We can't go running off after him without a plan."
The *Kell Dragon*'s sensors began bleeping.
"Contact," Tyria checked the reading. "Profile suggests a Vong picket-ship coming out from the remains of those two enforcer hulks."
Sannah's yellow eyes flashed as she checked their deflector shields and meager weaponry. "Shields and weapons are good."
The comm-unit began to flash. Tyria briefly held out a staying hand towards Sannah, then activated the unit. A voice only transmission came through.
"*Kell Dragon, this is the Freed Yuuzhan Vong Yorik-Akaga, Fanged Twilight. Please hold your fire."*
Tyria's eyebrows shot up. "This is the *Kell Dragon*. How do I know you're not part of some trap?"
A different voice answered. *"Kell Dragon, this is Mandalorian Or'ramikade recruit Kreda Craedo. These Vongese speak the truth. They rescued eight of my brothers and sisters at great risk to themselves and have been hiding out here after separating from the attacking fleet."*
"Kreda, what happened?"
"*The Vongese must have learned about the peace treaty between the Or'ramikade and Kyr'tsad and accelerated their attack plans. They were in the process of firing on Raxis Prime when Jedi Sarkin-Tainer*

contacted their commander with a deal. He identified himself as a Jedi and promised to go along peacefully if the commander gave the rest of us a twenty minute reprieve. It wasn't much time, but it was enough. There are still some of us on the planet, and the cease fire enabled this ship to covertly pick us up after our own vessels were destroyed. After the time limit passed, the Vongese commander launched some type of bomb, and, well… If it wasn't for the Jedi, ma'am, the nine of us would be all that was left. The Vongese must have been happy with their Jedi prisoner because they left after dropping that bomb. Didn't even stick around to do a clean sweep."
Tyria was a tumult of feelings as pride clashed with worry and anger at her son's own daring. "Where did the attack force originate from?"
"*Bandomeer, ma'am."*
"Bandomeer, of course," Tyria scoffed softly, leaning her head back and groaning. "Sit tight, Kreda. *Mand'alor* and the others will be in system in a little under an hour."
"I take it the treaty was successful, ma'am?"
"It was."
"We still don't know how the Vongese found out about it. The crew on this ship didn't know. If the Kyr'tsad didn't stab us in the back…"
"They didn't seem like the types. Their leader, anyway," Tyria replied. "But there is a chance one of their people, or one of ours, didn't like the idea…"
"If we were betrayed by one of our brothers, it'd be even worse than if Kyr'tsad did it."
"I know. We'll put together everything once *Mand'alor* arrives. Is there any way you could signal the survivors on Raxis Prime?"
"*Will do. And, for what it's worth, your son is one heck of a Jedi. From what I hear, he didn't even hesitate when the Vong ship came to take him. He just looked to the others and told them to run like they had hell itself nipping at their heels. From the looks of the planet, he was pretty accurate in his description. Like I said, he's one heck of a Jedi. "*
"That he is," Tyria said with a bittersweet sigh. "He most certainly is."
"Oh, and before I forget, he had the chaps on the ground relay a message up to us. We're supposed to pass it on to some Jedi named Sannah."
Sannah exhaled shakily. "I'm here."
"So the message goes something like 'he's sorry, he had no choice' and he asks you not to team up with Dinua and beat him to a bloody pulp when you save his foolish shebs. He also said that he cares about you a lot and that 'if he didn't make it, he'd keep watch over you through the Force…even when you become a fish'?"

Sannah sniffled, wiping at her eyes, as her stomach clenched painfully. "I am *so* going to kick his useless butt when I get him back."
"That's the spirit," Kreda said. *"He's twice as tough as any regular Mando'a. He'll definitely hold out until we can get to him."*
When the other two Mandalorian vessels dropped out of hyperspace, explanations were given once more. Coupled with the shock and anger, a new sense of determination filled the Mandalorians. The Yuuzhan Vong had made a mistake leaving them alive, and they would make the Yuuzhan Vong rue that decision.
None of the four ships in orbit were large enough for a joint meeting, so after some coordination, the survivors and new arrivals chose another location on Raxis Prime to gather.
A holographic image of Bandomeer and the surrounding systems glowed brightly as night fell on the planet. Over five dozen Mandalorian Supercommandos and commandos in training, studied the glowing red indicators that represented Yuuzhan Vong ships.
"There is no doubt that the Vong will attack Mandalore," Boba Fett began. "And there is no doubt that Mandalorians will die, just as some of us have already lost their lives. This is war. But we will pick ourselves up and fight not to avenge the deaths of those we lost, but fight to win this war so that no others join them. From this attack, it is clear the Vong don't think of us as friends anymore. A pity. I thought we were getting along just fine. Dinua Jeban will inform the rest of you as to our goals."
Dinua, in full Mandalorian armor with her helmet tucked under her arm, nodded. "There is only one goal in this attack, to create as much damage as possible for this massing fleet. The intel provided to us by Verde Vizsla, and the information from the crew of the *Vongese* picket-ship, when joined with the intel given to us by Jedi Sarkin Tainer, confirms that the *Vongese* won't be ready for an attack on *Manda'yaim* for at least another couple of months. We're going to hit them hard, destroying both supporting facilities and any docked vessels. *Mand'alor* and the senior *Or'ramikade* will be returning to the home planet to help prepare them for the eventual *Vongese* attack. The rest of us will be doing what we've been trained for. Jedi Sarkin Tainer."
Tyria stepped forward. "I informed the Galactic Alliance about the threat to this planet, and while they do not have the resources at the moment, our own Yuuzhan Vong allies do. The Freed Yuuzhan Vong government has given us two of their unused slaver-transports with which we can use to infiltrate the facilities at Bandomeer. Additionally, I have called in some old favors and two other ships will be joining us,

masquerading as escorting Peace Brigade vessels. In all, we will pretend to be a slaving convoy fresh from a run."
"These other people won't slow us down, will they?" One of the Mandalorians in the crowd spoke up. "You, your son, and Jedi Sannah have proven yourselves. But anyone else will become a liability."
"I assure you that the crew of the *No Luck Required* and *Artorias' Requiem* are more than capable," Tyria said smoothly. "They will not be a detriment in anyway. Before I hand the briefing back over to Dinua, I want to emphasize that the primary object *is* creating as much damage as possible. Only if the opportunity presents itself will we try to save my son. He did not give himself up only for all of us to get killed. If no opportunity arises, we will have to leave him behind."
Sannah looked startled at Tyria, wondering how the woman could say those words so coldly. Tyria, however, gave the briefest shakes of her head, and the Melodie Jedi remained silent. Dinua stepped forward again.
"My second for this mission will be Jintar. Should the Jedi and I fall in battle, you are to take orders from him," Dinua motioned to the holographic display. "Our primary targets are the Yuuzhan Vong base on the ground and the temporary starbase in orbit. Intel shows that the Yuuzhan Vong are keeping their ground forces and assault creatures at the terrestrial base. We take it out and we prevent the Yuuzhan Vong from even laying a foot on *Manda'yaim*. The starbase in orbit, I'm told is called a 'Worldship'; a mobile command vessel that acts as a fleet all on its own. We take out these two objectives and we will have pissed off the *Vongese* streaming towards *Manda'yaim,* ripe for the picking. Questions? No? Good, then get some food and some rest. We depart first thing tomorrow."
As the rest of the Mandalorians splintered off, Jintar and Dinua both remained.
"Tyria?" Sannah said softly, looking up at the older Jedi anxiously. "Did you really mean what you said…about not rescuing Doran if no opportunity emerges?"
"Yes," Tyria said, sounding completely calm.
"But what…"
"Sannah," Tyria motioned to Jintar and Dinua. "That's what these two are still here for."
"Exactly," Dinua said, donning her helmet so that the others wouldn't be able to see her worried expression. "We are here to ensure that such an 'opportunity' arises."
=}Chapter End{=

A\N: Looking ahead, the next chapter is on Sunday: Danni definitely has her work cut out for her as she struggles to keep the frightened Imperials from making a terrible mistake. While Jacen and Sarreti plan to show that they aren't out of the fight just yet. No matter how much the future changes, some things will remain the same. Tuesday: The strike on Bandomeer commences, Doran's fate, and the fate of Mandalore hang in the balance. It will be a mando-centric chapter, with no other story-lines in between. Thursday: The cards have been dealt and the winner takes all as the Yuuzhan Vong make one last push to take control over a dying empire. Who will come out ahead? And how will Luke react when he learns of Anakin's pyrotechnic display on Kalee? The ending of the Book 2 Force trilogy arc.
Thanks again for all of your support, silent or otherwise. It's amazing to think that people from at least ten different countries (five continents!) are reading this story! Review if you so desire.
25 more chapters to go, see you this weekend.

ADA 44

Forty-Four
=}I{= =}I{=
"Danni Quee."
The blond scientist looked up to see Shaeri enter the room. The Freed One looked unusually grim and had something in her hands.
"Shaeri?"
"There is a problem."
Danni blinked. "Problem?"
"A slaveseed infiltrator within your science labs," Shaeri produced a portable villip and what Danni recognized was a Yuuzhan Vong recording device. All standard equipment for an infiltrator forced to spy on his own people, with the consequences for doing otherwise being blinding pain. "You may have ruled out Yuuzhan Vong spies, but not a slaveseed infiltrator."
Danni blanched. "And you are sure?"
Shaeri leveled her blue eyes at the scientist and manipulated the recording device. Immediately, the voices of several scientists, including Director Ravis, could be heard.
"And you are certain this virus will work?"
"Positive, sir. We've tested it on several different samples, and the result is always the same. Death occurred three hours after infection, with symptoms showing up only in the last thirty minutes. This is time enough for those infected to pass it on. Our hypothesis was correct.

The genetic marker is within all Vong life, and this virus successfully targets and breaks it down. It's the perfect weapon."
"But it's not good enough. I want something more immediate and fast acting. It won't do our people any good if we have to wait three hours for the enemy to die while we're getting shot apart."
"We can definitely refine its effects, sir."
"Make it so. I want weaponized versions, with multiple modes of delivery as soon as possible. Moff Flennic has given us full permission to pull out all the stops. I want the Vong dead before they even know what hit them."
Danni held Shaeri's questioning gaze. "I talked with Director Ravis and Moff Flennic just three days ago, they won't deploy the virus. They promised."
Shaeri said nothing, instead, manipulating the node once more. The sounds of a second conversation filled the room.
"We've thrown that Jedi scientists off our backs for now, but the Moff still wants to see how effective the weapon is on the battlefield. He's already dispatched the Fatal Blow for the nearest Vong garrison with several of our latest samples. We've also sent a courier ship to Moff Crowal's people with another batch of the virus, so they'll be able to defend themselves too. We should receive word sometime in the next few days."
"But is what we're doing, right, sir?"
"We have no other choice. We've been out of contact with the rest of the Empire for an entire week now. Who knows what's happened. Bastion could have even fallen and we could be just sitting here on our arses waiting for help that will never come. It's time to carve our own way out of this mess."
Danni could feel herself grow even paler at what these recordings implicated. Not only had the Imperials ignored her warning, but the Yuuzhan Vong were aware of the virus as well.
"As you know, Danni Quee, a villip can repeat the last message it received if one knows how to properly coax it. This message is from two days ago." Shaeri continued. She set aside the recording device and held up the villip. After stroking it several times, it reverted and formed the image of a Yuuzhan Vong warrior with a small hole in the center of his forehead.
"You have done well, my pet. We have intercepted the ships you warned us about and the infidel virus is now in our hands. Continue as you have done and see if you cannot strike discord between the Jedi and the Imperials. The more distrust between the two, the easier they will fall."

The villip returned to its inverted state with a soft trill.
"Have you told anyone else about this?" Danni asked faintly.
"I would then have to answer how I recovered these two devices in the first place," Shaeri replied, before elaborating. "I discovered a Cloak of Nuun hidden onboard this vessel. There is no doubt a Yuuzhan Vong handler onboard. As you know, the Cloak of Nuun can render one invisible to the naked eye. I used it to gain access to the science lab and made my way to the quarters of 'Director Ravis'. It is there I found the recording device *and* the villip."
Danni could swear that her heart was about to beat out of her chest as it took all her power to keep herself from hyperventilating. There was only one reason why both devices would be in the same room. If Director Ravis had been compromised from the start, the entire project and all the scientific advancements were in jeopardy. "We have to warn Moff Flennic and Han and Leia."
"Danni, did *you* have anything to do with the development of this weapon?" Shaeri whispered, holding out an arm to keep Danni from leaving the room.
"No," Danni said honestly, meeting the Freed One's gaze. "I swear, I had nothing to do with it. I tried to stop them from using it."
Shaeri accepted this with a nod. "Then let us warn the others."
They sprinted through the halls of the *Defiant.* Danni huffed anxiously as her footsteps pounded noisily on the metal deck, cursing the fact that a Star Destroyer's corridors were so long. Finally, she and Shaeri reached their destination.
The two of them entered Moff Flennic's office and found Kyp Durron, Han, and Leia already present.
"Great timing, Danni, Shaeri," Han welcomed. "We were just discussing a way to break out of here and meet up with Luke and the others."
"Before or after testing a virus that's now in Yuuzhan Vong hands? Danni asked, directing her question solely to Flennic.
The Moff appeared struck dumb by what she had just said. "What do you mean?"
"You know what I mean," Danni scowled, storming up to his desk and slamming her hands down on top of it. "I warned you about the dangers of going ahead with your Omega Blue project! I told you the risks weren't worth the results. You even assured me that you had a change of heart! Thanks to your stubborn, short-sightedness, the Yuuzhan Vong now have possession of the latest batches of the virus and are well aware of your plans!"
"But…what…how…?"

"Director Ravis is either a slaveseed infiltrator or someone very close to him is," Danni produced the devices Shaeri obtained. She then spun a little white lie to protect Shaeri from any repercussions. "While I was in his office I noticed he had a villip and this recording device." She played the recordings and watched as Han and Leia's expressions went from alarmed to horrified. "The Yuuzhan Vong know about the virus, they have the virus, and they will no doubt make use of it in some way."
"What…what can we do?" Moff Flennic looked sick as he glanced pleadingly at Danni for answers.
"If I were you, I'd get started on a cure for it right away," Danni glowered. "The Galactic Alliance is only holding the front lines because of our own Yuuzhan Vong allies, like Shaeri. I don't need to say what will happen if Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong start deploying it all over the battlefield?"
"We also have to warn the rest of the Empire," Leia pointed out. "They have to be aware of possible retaliatory attacks."
"Either way, if Director Ravis has been compromised, we need to leave Marquarra," Kyp said. "When the Vong stop getting reports from their spies, they're going to come full force. And I doubt five Star Destroyers, a frigate, and a handful of TIEs can hold out long."
"It's worse," Danni said in a low voice, trying to impress on the others how serious the situation was. "Director Ravis has full knowledge as to how a yammosk jammer works, as well as detailed information about other counters we were developing. If the Yuuzhan Vong learn about how these counters work…"
"We'd be right back at square one again," Han said with a shake of his head. he glared at the Imperials. "You guys really know how to screw things up, don't you?"
"I've spoken with Taan," Shaeri said. "She assures me that no ships have gotten by the blockade for now, so any knowledge is definitely confined to Domain Vorrik. But if Vorrik uses the virus to help run the blockade, there is no one else to stop them from bringing that knowledge to Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong."
"General alert. Unauthorized departure of science facility shuttle detected. Scan detects two life forms onboard."
"I think Director Ravis discovered the villip missing," Danni said mildly. Compared to other troubles, a fleeing Yuuzhan Vong spy wasn't much of anything.
Moff Flennic hit a button on his arm-chair. "Bridge, can any of the vessels in orbit get a tractor lock?"

"Negative sir, the shuttle is one of the prototypes the Ubiqtorate had been working on. It's equipped with jammers and stealth systems. Our only option is to shoot it down."
"Hit it with ion cannons, then. I want the two taken alive for questioning. Let's find out how much damage they've caused." Moff Flennic rubbed at his temples for a moment, and then reactivated the comm.. "And send a messenger ship to Bastion. Have them send Director Stone over to replace Ravis. I want to have at least *some* Imperial control over the research going on here."
=}II{= =}II{=
It felt oddly good to be back on the *Trickster*, Jaina decided. She had missed the crew, their very dry, Yuuzhan Vong humor, and the casual, family-like atmosphere onboard. Even the Galactic Alliance commandos who had been assigned to the ship welcomed her back. They had definitely gone more 'Vong' since she had last seen them. Human, Twi'lek, or any other of the Galactic Alliance races, it was apparent that these commandos had acculturated aspects of their Yuuzhan Vong crewmates. Whether it was the domain markings tattooed on some of their faces—representing a combination of different Yuuzhan Vong domain markings—the amphistaffs curled up and attached to their utility belts, or the fact that they had modified their body-armor's colors to resemble the more naturalistic tone of Yuuzhan Vong lifeforms, these men and women from Borleias had truly blurred the line between the cultures of the two galaxies.
From the mix of Galactic Alliance assault shuttles and Yuuzhan Vong blastboulders in the cargo bay-turned-hangar, and the camaraderie amongst the mixed crew, the last few days aboard the ship had been a real happy eye-opener; once again reaffirming her belief that peace between the Yuuzhan Vong and the rest of the galaxy could be obtained. Which was why it was all the more important she got the location of Zonama Sekot to the rest of the Jedi.
"We are now ten light-years inside Imperial space," Falhar announced confidently, his role as pilot and acting captain of the *Trickster* when Jaina was not available having given the former Shamed One warrior a new outlook on life. He had confided in Jaina that when the war was over, he wanted to settle down on whatever planet was chosen for the Yuuzhan Vong. He had enough of fighting and politics and just wanted to live out his life as peacefully as possible.
"The Chiss major reports no difficulties with the Peace Brigade vessels," Rashak, the ship's villip operator, reported. "Escorting Freed Yuuzhan Vong Miid ro'ik report no contacts for several light-years."

To the outsider, their convoy of six Peace Brigade ships, a Vong frigate, and two Yuuzhan Vong cruisers, looked nothing out of the ordinary. There were countless such convoys traversing the interior of Yuuzhan Vong held space. Some carried prisoners, others carried supplies or soldier. With the collapse of the Peace Brigade government, the remaining Peace Brigade members scattered throughout the galaxy had become little more than slaves and mercenaries to the Yuuzhan Vong they were once allied to. Their ships were used as scouts and cannon fodder, their members used as advanced diplomatic units to help encourage systems to surrender. With the loss of Hutt space and the fleets at Ebaq 9, the Peace Brigade corps' job had gotten much harder.

Interrogation of the Peace Brigaders captured by Taan's people revealed that they had been brought into the Empire to help rally humans and others to their cause. Failing that, they would make contact with dissident factions of the government and support the Yuuzhan Vong through slave trade.

"We are nearing our destination," Falhar called out. "Arrival in five, four, three, two…"

The field of glowing stars around them stabilized as their convoy dropped out of hyperspace in orbit of the former garrison planet of Borosk. It scarcely looked as it once had. Once one of the most heavily fortified and defended planets in the Imperial Remnant, it bore little resemblance to the Empire's pride and joy. The surrounding asteroid belt had been used to great and terrible effect on the planet. Dovin basals had been attached to the massive space rocks, sending a near unstoppable bombardment of asteroids streaking into the planet. No number of turbolaser batteries or super-charged deflector shields could ward off the sheer mass and energy of the relentless projectiles. By the time the Yuuzhan Vong had finished with the planet, it appeared more like its surrounding asteroids than an actual planet. Borosk's mantel was still leaking through the ravaged crust, large chunks of the planet hanging out in low orbit, a permanent cloud of dust choking out the sun.

It had been a massacre.

Anyone who had been unfortunate enough to survive were now slaves to the occupying force. Several Yuuzhan Vong structures had already been erected, and a small fleet of a half-dozen ships stayed in orbit above this facility.

"We are being hailed," Rashak called out. "The commander is objecting to the presence of another domain within this system. He was expecting the Peace Brigade, but not the other ships. The Empire was

promised to Domain Vorrik by Shimrra himself, and they do not appreciate anyone who encroaches on this deal."
"Any chance we can bluff our way through this?" Jaina asked.
Rashak shook his head. "No, Yun-Harla. Domain Vorrik is notorious for slaying members of other domains for lesser offenses. The only reason why they haven't fired already is because they are most likely saving their ships for the empire they have invaded."
"And if we tell him that we have a message for the head of the domain?"
"We could try," Rashak grimaced. "But if we do that, I'll be passed from officer to officer so that they can ensure whatever message we have is worthy of B'Shith Vorrik's ears. Each of them will try to greet me in a way more insulting than the last, before I'll finally be put through to B'Shith. Depending on how low ranking this one is, it could take quite a while."
"Then maybe we should just leave the system and…" Jaina trailed off as one of the Yuuzhan Vong crew members entered.
"Yun-Harla, the facility below is a Shaper's compound," Wryadra, the ship's shaper spoke up, motioning towards the cognition hood. Curious, Jaina donned it and was able to see past the haze of dust covering the planet's atmosphere. A single structure stuck out from the dust cloud; a towering, odd-shaped spire. "It belongs to the shapers of Domain Rin. A minor domain under the renown Shaping Domain of Domain Zun-qin. Domain Rin's buildings have always had that unique, trapezoidal shape with the spire. If they are paired up with Domain Vorrik, something unusual is occurring."
"Unusual?" Jaina removed the hood to look back at the experienced Shaper.
"As Rashak said, Domain Vorrik would not normally let another domain operate within their sphere of influence. Especially not a domain as weak as Rin," Wryadra said, his voice as melodious and accented as ever. His hands, however, had formed tight balls as he appeared to be fighting back a surge of emotion. "Domain Rin is currently ostracized among the Yuuzhan Vong for causing the Zun-qin Worldship's death on the journey into your galaxy. But they claim that the Zun-qin were envious of their abilities and sabotaged the Worldship themselves. The truth is most likely in between. Nevertheless, it is said among the Yuuzhan Vong that if the shapers of Domain Rin were to try and create seeds of life, they would end up killing all instead. Fitting, as all of their projects have death as the ultimate goal. Paired with Domain Vorrik, that facility will only mean trouble in the future."
Jaina groaned. "I guess the family reunion will have to wait then."

"My apologies, Goddess."
"None necessary, Wryadra. All we have to do now is figure out how we can convince the guards to give us a guided tour."
"Goddess!" Falhar's alarmed cry startled everyone.
"Falhar?"
"Colonel Solo! The Matalok protecting the facility just fired some type of weapon on one of our Miid ro'ik escorts!"
"What?!" Jaina, using the ship's senses, was horrified as to what she saw. The yorik coral of their escorting ship was practically dissolving right before her eyes, as if acid was eating away at its entire length. As the ship disintegrated, Yuuzhan Vong bodies were expelled into space where they appeared to bubble and explode after only seconds. "Full reverse! Tell the other ship to fall back! Get us out of here!"
"Something is jamming the villip frequencies!" Rashak said. "We can't get a message out!"
"Dovin basals are not responding!" Wyrdra said in panic as he continued to try to coax some response from a control cluster that controlled the ship's shields and defenses. "They must have identified the *Trickster* by the dovin basal emissions and are producing a counter gravimetric wave that's paralyzing the dovin basal!"
The enemy Matalok rotated and propelled a canister of sorts that slammed directly into the other Miid ro'ik's bridge. The only way Jaina was able to find the black-painted container in the first place was through the Force; otherwise, she wouldn't have seen it at all. The Yuuzhan Vong had appeared to have adopted the Shadow Bomb concept, allowing the canister's momentum to carry it forward. Without the Force, the Miid ro'ik void crews never saw it coming. The canister hit, and a small flash signaled some sort of detonation. The Miid ro'ik continued to maneuver for a couple of very tense minutes before it froze, locked in on a straight course. The coral of the vessel appeared to bubble, and fluid began to spill out into space, freezing instantly. All at once, the frame of the vessel shattered, as if a giant hammer had just slammed into a frozen ice-sculpture. As the ship broke apart, the hundreds of bodies of its crew were thrown into space, twisting and flailing, where they too bubbled and burst into gory, frozen debris.
The Chiss-controlled Peace Brigade vessels immediately opened fire on the Matalok cruiser, but their black-market weapons were no match for the alien vessel's void defenses. The Matalok rotated once more, and in slow motion, Jaina watched through the senses of her ship as a third canister was fired right at the *Trickster*.

"Falhar! Evasive maneuvers, now!" Jaina yelled, seeing the container approach like a tiny missile through one of the *Trickster*'s cognition hoods.
"The dovin basal's are still not responding," Falhar shouted back.
"I've confirmed that one of the enemy vessels is producing a gravity wave that is in the direct opposite frequency of the dovin basal," Wryadra said, panic clear in his melodious inflections.
They had no time to do anything else as the canister slammed into the midsection of their ship and detonated in a small blast. The entire ship seemed to shudder from impact, and for a long moment, all was silent. Everyone seemed to hold their breath as seconds ticked by. The ship continued its maneuver, but after several minutes, it was apparent that something was going drastically wrong.
"Goddess, the yorik-coral of the *Trickster* is breaking down!" Wryadra said through clenched teeth.
Jaina immediately knew what was happening. She used her connection with the dying ship to send a message throughout the frigate.
"Everyone, abandon ship! Head to the hangar bay and use the two Galactic Alliance assault shuttles. Hurry!"
The bridge crew looked to Jaina for guidance and she motioned frantically to the door. "Go!"
As they ran, Jaina's mind worked overtime. Whatever had hit the Miid ro'ik cruisers had somehow also affected its escape-pods and coralskippers. Though the escape crafts had pulled away, they too had dissolved. Unfortunately, this was a big problem. Though the *Trickster* had once been crewed by a skeleton crew, the multiple defections and growth of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong movement meant that the ship was at full capacity. Fifty Galactic Alliance commandos were paired up with fifty Yuuzhan Vong Freed One warriors, and the ship itself had a crew of over a hundred-twenty. The two assault shuttles within the *Trickster*'s cargo-bay-turned-hangar had a maximum capacity of fifty-five people, and that was if people were squeezed in. There wasn't going to be enough room for everyone. Then again, she thought grimly, maybe everyone wouldn't be able to make it. As Jaina ran down the halls with the bridge crew, she began to hear screams of pain reverberate from the upper decks. She closed her eyes, trying to tune them out.
"Yun-Harla, the ceiling!" Rashak yelled. The ceiling was beginning to blacken and bubble, parts of the coral liquefying and dripping down.
"Keep moving!" Jaina yelled. She could see the coral walls around them taking on a sickly sheen.

"Goddess…" Jaina heard a gurgle from behind her and blanched as she saw Amah, the ship's weapon's operator, begin to stagger, his eyes pleadingly meeting hers. He was holding out a hand to her as blood began to stream from his eyes and nose, his purple skin blackening like the hull of the *Trickster*, with blisters and sores forming all over.
"Keep moving!" Jaina told the others, running back to Amah's side. The Freed One looked up at her pleadingly. "Goddess…please…save… m…"
Amah keeled over, the blisters and sores worsening. The Yuuzhan Vong Freed One clutched at his throat, gasping for air. As he did, though, his skin began to peel away. The Freed One convulsed, once, twice, and then lay still.
Jaina tore her gaze away, fighting back tears as she hurried after the others. As she ran, she passed other bodies in the hallway, and she pointedly looked away, not wanting to see who they were.
While the bridge crew sprinted through the corridors of the *Trickster*, globs of yorik coral started to collapse in liquid heaps onto a progressively unsteady deck. They could see bodies of other crew members, who had likewise suffered agonizing deaths, in the many rooms they passed. Some of the survivors joined them, terrified of the deaths of their companions.
They ran, well aware that the ship was breaking apart. Part of the deck gave way, and Rashak let out a cry as he disappeared into the hole. They were nearing the hangar when the entire bulkhead gave out. Nearly everyone who had joined them was sucked out into space in the blink of an eye.
Both Jaina and Falhar gripped onto the membrane door with one hand and managed to grab the arms of Liir, the bridge's young blazebug operator, with their other. The former Shamed One, no older Tahiri, was gazing up at them with wide, terrified eyes. Wryadra managed to grab both Jaina and Falhar's free hand from the opposite side of the door, lending them his support. But the catastrophic breach was gradually pulling them all out of the ship.
And then, to Jaina's despair, blisters and sores began to form on Liir's face and arms. Seeing the blackening skin and blisters on her arm, Liir gave Jaina one last weak smile, closed her eyes in defeat, and let go. The former Shamed One joined the bodies of the other crewmembers in the rapid forming graveyard in space.
For a very long second, Falhar and Jaina could only watch helplessly as Liir's body tumbled out into the vacuum of space. Finally, with great effort, Wryadra pulled the both of them into the hangar. The two assault shuttles were still waiting. A Rodian Galactic Alliance

commando motioned to them from the nearest one. The commando could see the hull breach outside the rapidly weakening membrane door and grimaced. He touched his comlink.
"[That's it! Take off!]"
Jaina froze once she was inside the vehicle, aghast at how so few people had made it, commandos and Yuuzhan Vong.
"The other shuttle?"
"[No one else is in it, ma'am]," the Rodian replied in Huttese as the engines of the ship whined to life. "[We're all that's left]."
"We're all that's left?" Jaina whispered, her eyes roaming over the shell-shocked survivors. "Only thirty-eight of us?"
"[Plus the six in the cockpit. The projectile hit the area that held dovin basal and circulatory systems. Whatever payload it had, it spread quickly.]"
"And were the other commandos affected by the…whatever it was?" Jaina noted that out of the survivors, only five of them were with the commando unit.
The Rodian bowed his head mournfully. "[No ma'am. Hull breach in the commando ready-room. I only survived because I was late getting there. The others managed to pull themselves out of the room. To my knowledge, none of us suffered from whatever it was the Yuuzhan Vong contracted]."
Wryadra stayed behind while Jaina, Falhar, and the Rodian commando moved to the bridge; where the pilots were hard at work steering the assault shuttle around at torrent of plasma fire.
"Colonel, we can't get clear with that Matalok firing on us." The pilot said as she stood behind him.
"Get me a tractor on what's left of the *Trickster*," Jaina replied tersely, the deaths of the *Trickster's* crew weighing heavily on her.
"Aye, aye, ma'am," the human commando piloting the vessel replied. "Tractor locked.
"Set course for the Matalok. If whatever it is they fired at us only affects Yuuzhan Vong, let's see what happens to their ship," Jaina said grimly. "Give me the comm-line to Major Nuruodo."
"Line established."
"Major, this is Colonel Solo. I'm running a science experiment of my own. Can your people provide cover for another couple of seconds? We have a hot payload to deliver."
"Good to hear you survived, Colonel. We'll try, but we're really taking a beating. I'm getting the impression that these ships weren't meant to fight a military cruiser."

"A couple of seconds is all we need," Jaina said, gripping the back of the pilot's chair. "Then get back to Taan and warn her of what's happened."
As they approached with the rapidly disintegrating remains of the *Trickster* in their wake, the Matalok veered sharply away from them and intensified their barrage of plasma.
"That's a good sign," Falhar said, his grey eyes stormy. "They fear what we are going to do."
A solid plasma hit blasted through the assault shuttle's shields and caused smoke to fill the back of the vehicle.
"Stay on target," Jaina said through gritted teeth.
Another hit blew away one of the shuttle's stabilizing fins.
"Stay on target."
As the shuttle barreled towards the Yuuzhan Vong cruiser, it made a sharp turn, swinging the remains of the *Trickster* forward like the end of a bullwhip. The decaying coral smashed against the coral of the Matalok, while two more plasma hits pounded the shuttle.
"We've lost engines," the pilot said with controlled calm. "Setting us on a re-entry course with the planet."
"By Yun-Yuuzhan," Falhar whispered, watching the monitor which showed the input from the rear sensor.
The attention of the cockpit was soon riveted on the display. The area where the *Trickster* had smashed into was blackening and decaying, the spread of which was rapidly creeping along the length of the massive ship. Escape pods and coralskippers were taking off almost immediately, but some had not been fortunate enough to avoid the ill-effects of whatever weapon had been used. In slow motion, the occupants of the cockpit watched as the entire Matalok began to break apart, like a giant creature was eating its way through the center.
"Major Nuruodo, take your forces and go!" Jaina ordered into the comm as the other Yuuzhan Vong ships tried to put as much distance between themselves and the decaying Matalok. "If Taan isn't warned about this…"
"*And you, ma'am*?"
"We'll be fine. This intel is more important at the moment."
"*We'll try and send help when we can, Colonel."*
The planet of Borosk grew ever closer in the shuttle's windows.
The pilot grimaced. "Brace for impact!"
=}III{= =}III{=
A badly shaken Shaeri entered the conference room of the Star Destroyer *Defiant*, garnering the attention of the Jedi and Imperial officers within. In one hand was her personal villip with a direct link to

Taan's command ship. The other was held tightly against her side to keep it from shaking.
"Shaeri?" Danni said questioningly. After they had apprehended Director Ravis and confirmed that he had in fact been controlled by a Yuuzhan Vong slaveseed, it had been decided that the survivors of Moff Flennic's sector fleet would try to link up with elements of Moff Crowal's fleet in the Perrinn sector. Marquarra was abandoned, and the small fleet was skirting the border of Wild Space and Imperial space in an attempt to bypass the Yuuzhan Vong held neighboring sector.
"I just got word from Taan, the *Trickster* has been lost in battle."
Leia and Han stiffened. Leia had felt panic and despair come from her daughter a couple of hours ago. Though those feelings had since been replaced by determination and confidence, Leia had known that something bad had happened.
"What? How?" Kyp asked.
Shaeri glared at the Imperial side of the table, stabbing her crippled arm out in their direction accusatorily. "From the sound of it, a Shaped form of Omega Blue was used. Two escorting Miid ro'ik cruisers with crews of three hundred each were also destroyed. The *Trickster*'s Chiss escort managed to return to Taan and relay that Jaina Solo's shuttle had been shot down over Borosk. Taan is abandoning the blockade of Imperial space and pulling her ships back. Even though she says that more of Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong are coming, she cannot maintain the blockade in the face of such a weapon."
"Shaeri…" Danni trailed off, having never seen the submissive and quiet Yuuzhan Vong so angry.
"Was it worth it, Moff?" Shaeri hissed at the Imperials. "You just doomed the citizens of your sector. The blood of nearly a thousand Freed Yuuzhan Vong are on your hands. Danni Quee warned you that your project would do no good and you ignored her."
Moff Flennic swelled. "Now just a minute! I was doing what I thought was best for my people at the time!"
"Best?" Shaeri said incredulously. "You are no better than Shimrra or Tsavong Lah, who cares only for their image and an Empire that no longer is! Your Empire has been dying a slow death for many years now, sustained by fanatical thoughts and people like you! If you truly had the best interest of your people in mind, you would have spent the energy you put into developing Omega Blue into finding ways to safely evacuate your people!"
"Shaeri," Leia said firmly. "I understand you are upset, but at the moment, we are allies. Instead of pointing fingers, what we need to do is figure out a way to counteract this latest Yuuzhan Vong push. This

isn't the first time they've brought to bear weapons we haven't seen before."
Kyp looked to the Imperial scientist Sanix Fous. "What is the status on a counter-agent to the virus?"
Sanix shook his head grimly. "The virus was designed to kill and avoid Yuuzhan Vong attempts to come up with a counter. But we didn't even consider the Yuuzhan Vong could re-purpose it for themselves. It can survive at temperatures below freezing and the heat from detonation of a torpedo. It's also designed to kill fast, so implementing a cure for someone infected will be next to impossible. If the Yuuzhan Vong have managed to Shape it, a cure *is* impossible."
"Keep on it," Leia said encouragingly. "Now that the Yuuzhan Vong know the virus works, they won't be afraid to use it."
"We're still several hours out from Cantras Gola," Han began. "Once we meet up with Luke and the others, we can decide on the next course of action. Even if we wanted to. These Star Destroyers and a couple of frigates isn't going to be much against a Yuuzhan Vong battle fleet."
"There's more," Shaeri said with a deathly calm that belayed the irate expression still on her face. "Taan told me that the Freed Yuuzhan Vong will be pulling all support from Galactic Alliance positions around Imperial space. Since the 'Empire' was so kind enough as to make a virus that will kill all Yuuzhan Vong life, we see no reason why we should support them. For the safety of our own people, the Freed Yuuzhan Vong forces at Gabredor, Marmoth, Dubrillion, and Ahakista have all been withdrawn."
"Shaeri…" a horrified silence filled the room. The locations she mentioned were all major hyperspace lines leading deep into Imperial territory.
But Shaeri wasn't finished. "Additionally, the Freed Yuuzhan Vong would like to give a warning and a reminder to the Remnant. The Freed Yuuzhan Vong are our own people. We are not officially recognized by the Galactic Alliance at the moment, so we are separate of their policies and treaties that bind its members. We remain allied to the Jedi only by word, and help them because they have seen that not all Yuuzhan Vong want what Shimrra wants. We have no such diplomatic status with the Remnant at the moment and have treated it as friends because the Jedi view it as such. However, the creation of the virus, and the gross negligence that have allowed it to fall into the hands of Shimrra's Yuuzhan Vong, have put this into doubt. Should the Remnant continue to pursue research that will endanger *all* Yuuzhan Vong life, then the Freed Yuuzhan Vong will have no choice but the declare war on the Remnant as well."

"Any such research will *not* be condoned by this government or its representatives," Sanix said, glaring at Moff Flennic, as if daring him to say otherwise. "The only stock of Omega Blue left has been kept for the purposes of finding a counter to it."
"You will forgive me if your reassurances do little to help," Shaeri remarked caustically. "Danni Quee has been lied to before, and, unknown to the rest of us, your government attempted to launch an attack with the virus."
"Then we will show you that the Freed Yuuzhan Vong can trust the Empire again," Sanix replied, bowing his head apologetically.
"I hope so. We are used to the usual bigotry, hatred, and fear. But when someone ignores all that we have done, everything we've tried to do, and tries to kill us just for being who we are, then we have to draw the line," Shaeri said, her voice softening. "War with the Remnant is the last thing we want, but both the Freed Ones and Shimrra's followers are *all* Yuuzhan Vong, and there are some things we cannot let happen."
"I understand," Sanix said solemnly. He glanced to the others. "If there is nothing else required of the science division, we will be in the lab continuing to search for a way to counter this mistake."
Moff Flennic gave a half-hearted wave of his hand, looking much older and paler than before. The delegation of seven scientists rose and left. Danni likewise excused herself. "Maybe I'll be able to help as well. One more mind can't hurt."
When the scientists were gone, the captains of the Star Destroyers and Moff Flennic looked almost ashamed as they averted their eyes from Shaeri. An uncomfortable silence filled the room until Moff Flennic cleared his throat.
"I…am not feeling well at the moment. We will continue the briefing at a later time. Dismissed." The Imperials left the room, pointedly avoiding Shaeri as if angering her would bring down the wrath of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong on their home-worlds.
When the doors shut, the Jedi, plus Han, turned to the lone Yuuzhan Vong in the room.
"Shaeri," Leia began gently. "Is there any way you can convince Taan to return your people to their position? The entire Empire shouldn't have to suffer for the acts of a few."
Shaeri looked shrewdly at Leia. "Lady Solo, I have grown up in the sect of Yun-Harla, watched your General Antilles work on Borleias, have received lessons from Garik Loran and Kell Tainer, followed your son and Tahiri for nearly a year now, and in my time on Mon Calamari, the

man named Lando Calrissian took me sightseeing and gave me business tips. I think these have all been very bad influences for me."
Han blinked once he understood what she was saying. "You mean the Freed Yuuzhan Vong are still there?"
Shaeri shook her head. "No, they are still gone, I did not lie. The danger was too great and there are too few of us still to afford such a drastic loss. I simply omitted the fact that before they left, they had informed the nearby Galactic Alliance fleet of our plans to withdraw and traded places with them. The Freed Yuuzhan Vong are now holding the garrison at Shaum Hii, while the Galactic Alliance fleet under your General Crispin has taken over our previous duties."
"And the part about the Freed Yuuzhan Vong declaring war?" Kyp chuckled lightly, shaking his head at the petite Yuuzhan Vong teen.
"That was true…to some extent," Shaeri said with a sly grin. "Taan said that we'd only go to war with the blessings of the Jedi. Since we know that the Jedi would hardly condone such a war…" Shaeri trailed off, leaving the rest unsaid. "I simply needed to let the Moff and other scientists know that the Freed Yuuzhan Vong are very angry at them. And since they didn't respond to Danni's niceness…"
"You bullied them instead," Han smirked.
Silent laughter or muffled chuckles filled the room.
Shaeri took on a contrite expression and shifted uneasily as she held Leia's eyes. "Did I do something wrong?"
Leia sighed in amusement, got up from her seat, and placed an affectionate hand on Shaeri's good arm. "No, not at all. You have a right to defend your people."
"A little warning would have been nice though. You know, so us old people don't get heart attacks," Han added.
"Don't listen to him," Leia remarked, rolling her eyes. "You did well, Shaeri. Hopefully Moff Flennic and the others will take this lesson to heart."
"Remind me to invite you next time the Dozen plays a round of sabaac," Kyp said encouragingly. "Maybe we can teach you a couple more tricks."
Shaeri looked up at Kyp with a tilt of her head and a contrite, honest expression. "Since I know you can't read me through your Force, why not? I'm sure a great and powerful Jedi Master like yourself can tell when a humble Freed One such as myself is lying. Then again, what would I do with all your credits?"
Kyp looked gob smacked as the room broke out into laughter.

"I am far from the frightened and amazed Shamed One Tahiri found on Yun-Harla's flagship, Master Durron," Shaeri said proudly. "I am a Freed Yuuzhan Vong after all."
Kyp leaned back in his chair, chuckling with the rest of the group. "You sure are. And you've definitely been spending too much time around sneaky people."
Shaeri agreed with a smile, but then looked to Leia seriously. "I do not think that my implied threats will work on everyone in the Remnant. They are running scared and growing desperate. Without any way to contact their capital planet or their leaders they are easy targets for Domain Vorrik and may come up with even more foolhardy ideas. Also, if there are more slaveseed infiltrators, any counter for the virus will be at risk."
"It's one of the reasons why I suggested to Moff Flennic that he should join forces with the other two Moffs in the Perrinn sector," Leia nodded, understanding the young Freed One's concerns. "Alone, these Moffs are a danger to everyone, including themselves. But the moment they have some sort of chain of command, someone else to check their powers, they become very efficient at what they do. I'm sure Luke and Kyle will also help out."
"I hope you are right," Shaeri sighed. "You do realize what will happen if Omega Blue is used outside of the Remnant's territory?"
"Apart from Taan withdrawing more of her Forces?" Han asked.
"It is much, much worse than that, Han Solo," Shaeri looked at him gravely. "Many of the Freed Ones will fear that Omega Blue is retribution from the gods for straying from Shimrra's True Way. Though myself and Taan are friends with Anakin and Tahiri, you have to remember that a majority of the Freed Ones joined our movement because they see the *Jeedai* as their protectors, as avatars of the gods, their salvation from a cycle of warfare and death. If we fail to stop Omega Blue, my people will start to believe that the *Jeedai* were indeed the deceivers as Shimrra has proclaimed. That the *Jeedai* were powerless to stop the virus and that only Shimrra's way would give them a chance at any life at all. They will return to Shimrra's sides by the thousands and all that Anakin and Tahiri started will be loss. All it takes is one vessel slipping by the Galactic Alliance blockade of Remnant space, one vessel with samples of Omega Blue making it back to Yuuzhan'tar, and disaster will follow in its wake."
=}IV{= =}IV{=
General Edor Crespin, a veteran commander who had worked alongside Admiral Ackbar, Mon Mothma, General Antilles, and the other heroes of the Rebellion, was now three years out of retirement and

extremely grumpy for it. Throughout the New Republic, he had been responsible for training the next generation of A-wing pilots from the academy at Folor. He had happily retired at his home on Corulag after over forty years of military service six short years ago. Spent his spare time building a sky-hopper from a kit and racing it through the canyons behind his house. Appeared at the local schools to inspire the kids to follow their dreams. Family wasn't something he ever thought he'd have. He was a career military man after all. But the small town he had retired to had been the next best thing. Heck, he had even been hired as a flight teacher for a local Jedi's—someone named Marek or something along those lines—two kids. It had been peaceful, idyllic. And then the Vong had come. The news reports streaming in faster than the reporters could get them out. Sernpidal destroyed, the New Republic fleets in full retreat, one planet after another falling to this unknown threat. He had heard that Wedge and the other 'retired' soldiers were returning to the ranks to help bolster the fleets. Crespin joined them. And then a few months later, his home-planet became the next Vong victim. He briefly wondered what had happened to that Jedi's family, knowing full well that being a Jedi on a Vong occupied world was like a death sentence. He grimaced. So many people had died and the tide of the war was only just beginning to turn.

And now, thanks to information from the unlikeliest of allies, a Chiss detachment and the Freed Yuuzhan Vong, the tide was in danger of turning against them once more. The enemy Yuuzhan Vong had already probed their defenses numerous times in an attempt to run the blockade he had had his people set up. Each time, a single ship or two would dart forth, then withdraw, never engaging with seven capital ships under his command. General Crespin, however, knew it was only a matter of time before the feints would give way to an all-out break-out attempt.

"General!" His comm-operator called out. "Dovin basal mines just snagged two Yuuzhan Vong fleets! One of the forces came out of Remnant space, the other came from the Mid-Rim sectors. We're trapped between them. I think they're trying to run the blockade."

Crespin coolly began relaying orders aboard his Mon Cal cruiser, aptly named *Folor's Legacy*. "Launch all fighters. Have the heavy ships do most of the pounding, the A-wings take on enemy fighters, and the X-wings and B-wings hang back just in case anyone gets by us."

"Sir."

"Status on the enemy forces?"

"The force out of Remnant space is five-capital ships and a dozen escort-ships strong. The Mid-Rim force is twice that size."

"Message from the Freed Yuuzhan Vong fleet! Shaum Hii is under attack as well, they cannot assist us!"
"A two-pronged attack? I guess the new Vong Warmaster really is a step up from his predecessor," General Crespin muttered. "Have the Chiss jump in behind the Mid-Rim Vong fleet, and concentrate fire on the Remnant-side fleet. We're going to need all hands for this one."
=}V{= =}V{=
Jacen fully expected it when what was left of the Death Knights stormed through the hangar towards him as he stood in the doorway.
"You bastard!" Maez snarled, having risen from where he was tending to an injured pilot. He stomped through the busy hangar, shaking a finger at Jacen as he vibrated with rage. "You frippin' bastard!" He roared. "We followed your directions and Tyree, Zest, and Nanqi are dead!"
"It was either their squadrons or the entire One-Eighty-First," Jacen replied coolly. "If I hadn't directed their squadrons into the skips, the entire fighter wing, including *all* of the Death Knights, would have been killed."
"Don't give me that kark! What the heck is your Vongsense for if you couldn't even see that trap?" Maez shoved Jacen hard in the chest. "Your overconfidence damn well got us all killed!"
"The thing about traps," Vergere interjected smoothly. "Is that one is not supposed to see them before they are triggered. These Yuuzhan Vong have no doubt learned from Ebaq Nine and, like any competent commander should, adjusted their tactics accordingly. If it were not for Jacen's ability to direct the remaining Star Destroyers, we would not be here today."
Maez, breathing heavily, glared at the Fosh.
"Maez, it's enough," Waxarn finally spoke up, trying to calm the agitated members of his squadron. It was hard to do considering five had fallen at Alema's hand—a friend of the Solos—and three more had just fallen at Jacen's; albeit indirectly. Of the Death Knights that had come to the Remnant, half were now dead. "Vergere's right. If it *wasn't* for Jacen's ability to redirect the fleet, none of us would have survived that engagement. We all knew the risks when they signed up for this mission. As painful as their deaths are, we can't start tearing each other apart and insult their memory like that."
Maez swore an oath under his breath and stalked off, taking with him most of the Death Knights. Waxarn very stiffly inclined his head towards Jacen, before moving to follow the others.

"That went well," Tahiri muttered, a streak of dried blood down the side of her face showed where she had smacked her head into the front of her cockpit after a jarring collision with an asteroid fragment.
"I'd feel the same way if Maez or Waxarn just ordered Zekk, Lowie, and Tesar to their deaths," Jacen said grimly, looking slightly haunted as he took in the many damaged and battered fighters now being worked on. His lips barely moved as he saw stretcher after stretcher cart away the wounded. "It was the only way."
"They know," Tahiri said gently. "They know."
After the disastrous fight at Muunilinst, what was left of the Imperial fleet had retreated back to the Bescane system and met up with the remaining eight Star Destroyers of the Obtrexta Sector Fleet. With Bescane being a heavily industrialized world, similar to Coruscant, it was fairly obvious what would happen to it should the Yuuzhan Vong take the system. Bescane was also the last major system before Bastion, and their only chance to slow the Yuuzhan Vong advance. The lack of long range communication prevented them from knowing how Grand Admiral Pellaeon and his fleet were doing, which only added to the tension.
Despite the fact that there were only eight enemy capital ships; as the Yuuzhan Vong had just proven, numbers weren't everything. Even with eleven Star Destroyers and several wings of fighters, the Imperials and Jedi counterparts weren't exactly sure if they could do their job. The ambush had severely damaged the trust between the Imperials and Jedi, especially so since the Imperials had taken the brunt of the casualties so far. Seventeen Star Destroyers lost in half as much time, along with the death of the Moff of the Obtrexta sector who had been leading the second unit, wasn't exactly a winning endorsement for the Vongsense and battlemeld.
"Everyone knows that it wasn't going to be easy," Moff Sarreti said reassuringly. "The Yuuzhan Vong haven't conquered most of the galaxy by being dumb after all."
"He's right though," Jacen sighed. "I should have realized something was wrong when the shapes of the capital ships I was seeing was off. If Anakin had seen them…"
"But he wasn't here," Tahiri offered. "You couldn't have known that the Yuuzhan Vong would create yorik coral structures around asteroids and attach dovin basals to them. You were using Vongsense, not the Force. The asteroids would have been out of your ability to perceive them. At least we knew they were coming."

"Fat lot of good that did," Jacen motioned to a flaming gunboat that had more or less melted into scrap. "Tell that to the men and women who died."
A single Imperial shuttle coasted up into the busy hangar bay. But with the losses the fighter compliment of the *Protector* had taken, there was more than enough room for it. After the landing ramp sequence cycled, the captains of the other ten Star Destroyers emerged. Most of the reinforcements were older *Victory*-class Star Destroyers, with an *Imperial*-class and an Interdictor thrown into the mix.
"Admiral Pryl, thank you for joining us." The Moff greeted the only female officer to emerge from the shuttle. Tanda Pryl was the captain of the *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer, the *Thunderflare*, and commander of the taskforce of six Star Destroyers that had joined them.
"Responding as ordered, Moff Sarreti," she shook Sarreti's offered hand.
"We're in for an uphill fight. Still no word from the Grand Admiral?"
"No sir. I've already taken the liberty of dispatching a messenger ship that will report to us the moment Grand Admiral Pellaeon and the others arrive at Bastion."
"Good, until then, we have to hold off the Vong until the Grand Admiral's forces get there."
"That's why I brought the *Wrack*, sir."
Moff Sarreti turned towards the young captain of the Interdictor cruiser, the *Wrack.*"Captain Devis."
"Moff Sarreti," Devis saluted. "Good to see you made it out, sir."
"Jacen Solo made that possible," Moff Sarreti inclined his head towards the Jedi. "Is your ship ready for the workout of its life? We have a plan ready, but it'll make your ship one heck of a target."
"The *Wrack*is always ready, sir. Being the bait beats interdictor duty any time."
The Moff moved to address all of the captains as they began a brisk walk through the *Protector*'s hallways. "Gentlemen, Admiral. This is Jedi Jacen Solo and Tahiri Kwaad, on loan to us from the Galactic Alliance. After I outline the general plan of attack, they'll be debriefing you about the tactics they expect in the coming engagement. I won't lie, the danger will be great. But it's time to show the Yuuzhan Vong that the Empire isn't just going to roll over because we got our noses bloodied."
=}VI{= =}VI{=
She had had better days, Jaina thought, slowly returning to consciousness. She winced as she tried to move, the sound of sparking electrical wires and smelling melting plastic greeting her. Groaning,

she tried to wet her lips and tasted the sour copper taste of her own blood. She opened one eye, the other stubbornly remaining swollen shut from the contusion she had recently obtained.
Then again, as memory of what had occurred filled her mind, she supposed she was lucky to be alive at all. The assault shuttle she was in had been shot down while above the Imperial Remnant planet Borosk. Or what was left of the planet anyways. An asteroid bombardment had turned the planet into a volcanic wasteland, with active magma flows all across the planet's surface. Their shuttle had fortunately avoided these rivers of molten rock, crashing instead through a brittle layer of volcanic rock, bounced about an inactive magma tube, before finally spinning to a halt between two ledges overlooking a stream of molten lava. Of course, she had been unconscious for the last few stages of the journey; and opening one's eye to find that all that separated you from a bubbling river of molten rock was a splintered transparasteel viewport wasn't exactly the best way to wake up.
The brown-haired Jedi called upon the Force to ease her more aggravating symptoms, including a broken arm; biting back a muffled cry as she set the bones herself. Panting, she then concentrated on the shuttle, lifting it and setting it down on a less precarious position. Once that was done, Jaina collapsed back to her knees and tried to regain her strength.
The shifting of the shuttle appeared to rouse other survivors and faint groans filled the ship. Jaina couldn't speak for the Yuuzhan Vong members aboard, but she could tell through the Force that there had been no further Galactic Alliance casualties during the crash. As she took note of the Yuuzhan Vong, it was apparent that all of the survivors of the *Trickster*, had likewise pulled through.
"Falhar," Jaina moved over to help her helmsman to his feet.
"Colonel," Falhar wheezed, a gash over his head and scrapes to the left side of his body signs that the impact hadn't been easy on him either. "I will be fine."
Jaina breathed a bit easier, ignoring the twinge in her ribs as she exhaled. "You better be." She moved over to support Wryadra in his seated position. "You okay, Wryadra?"
Wryadra dazedly stared at his own burnt and bloodied hands, replying faintly in Yuuzhan Vong. Though Jaina didn't quite understand it, Falhar emitted a chuckle and shook his head in response.
"Falhar?"

"The joke does not translate well in your language," Falhar remarked. "It's also probably better if you knew Shaping terminology as well. He is 'all right,' though, so do not worry."
The forty-four surviving members of the *Trickster* gathered what supplies they could from the broken shuttle and exited out onto the obsidian-like rocky ledge. The pilots were all patted on their backs for such a successful, casualty-free, crash-landing, while Jaina took note of their surroundings.
The Rodian commando from earlier approached her mid-way through her survey. "[Colonel, I have Major Nuruodo on the comm. She and her people are making their way down to us.]"
"What?" Jaina blinked. She took the offered comlink. "Major Nuruodo, I thought I told you to get clear and warn Taan and the others."
"*I received your message, ma'am. But the transmission was not entirely clear. I sent the others back and had my own ship follow the trail of destruction you left. We were also shot down but landed intact a kilometer away from your position, and have only just reached the crater your ship made. Stand by, we have a visual on your shuttle now and are repelling down to your position now."*
Jaina glanced up instinctively. Several blue-skinned figures, their color made black by the red light of the magma, unfurled ropes down the glassy rocks and began to descend. After several moments, Major Irolia Nuruodo and twelve of her people reached their ledge. The Chiss' faces were smudged with soot and ash, and all were wearing rebreathers.
"Major," Jaina said.
"Ma'am," Irolia saluted.
"Explain," Jaina motioned to the burgundy-and-black-wearing Chiss.
"A Chiss officer does not abandon his or her commanding officer if there is ample proof that the commanding officer is alive."
"Oh?"
"That and Colonel Fel would have drawn and quartered me if you had perished under my watch," Irolia added, maintaining her professional tone.Jaina fought back a smile in spite of everything. "Very well. Since we both don't have vessels, finding one is apparently a priority."
"I concur, ma'am."
Jaina eyed her own survivors and an odd thought struck her; a mix-raced Galactic Alliance commando unit, Yuuzhan Vong, and Chiss, were probably about to embark on the first such joint operation ever, and there were no holocameras or anything to document it.
"Ma'am?"
Jaina shook herself. "It's nothing. The Yuuzhan Vong structure we saw earlier probably has some mode of transportation off this planet."

"Then it is a good thing we are not far," Wryadra spoke up, joining the two women. He stretched out an arm and pointed to a distant location further down the river of molten rock. "That is my people's equivalent of a geo-thermal energy plant. Where it is, a Shaping compound will not be far away."
They strained to see what he was pointing at, at first wondering how he could see anything from the distance they were at. Then they did a double take. What they had thought was a lava flow dropping off from a high cliff was in fact something else altogether. A massive creature, the same color as the surrounding rocks, and easily the height of the massive chasm they were in, appeared to be letting a stream of magma cascade off rock-like plates on his back.
"Is that creature hostile?" Jaina said hesitantly.
"Oh very much so," Wryadra nodded. "They are easily agitated, and are known to even slay the shapers who tend to it. The name is not important, although a literal translation in your language would be 'fire-bather.' It will spend most of its adolescent and early years of its adult life beneath that flow of molten rock, developing a shell of its own. It has been bred so that it can sustain itself with a diet of yorik coral. We are fortunate, a fully mature 'fire-bather' is easily the size of a Chuun M'arh frigate."
"Thank you for the warning," Jaina swallowed nervously. "So that one's a baby then?"
"Yes," Wryadra confirmed. "It must have just been brought in for the compound. Like I said earlier, once they are in place, they will not stray far from the magma stream until their adult stage in life."
"And the actual compound?"
"I suspect that there will be some type of slave-pen near the creature itself, but the actual shaper damutek is directly above it," Wryadra motioned to the black stone ceiling. There, some type of Yuuzhan Vong growth was spread out, looking as if it was eating the steam rising off of the massive creature's back.
"Above it," Jaina said faintly. "Great." She spun to face the others. "Okay, gather any supplies from the shuttle. Blaster packs, rifles, grenades, bring them all. There's no telling how many Yuuzhan Vong are in that base, and we won't be coming back to reload."
As the others moved to obey, Irolia stepped forward. "Ma'am. We're going to be attacking the Yuuzhan Vong base?"
"We'll avoid combat if we can," Jaina shook her head. "Our primary objective is to steal a ship and get out of here. Our secondary objective is to see just what the Shapers are doing up there. I want to know how they knew who we were and what that weapon they fired on us is. In

either case, all of our answers will be up there in that Shaping compound."

=}VII{= =}VII{=

They were about as close to the slave-pens as they were comfortable with. The unfortunate survivors of the Borosk invasion all bore the tell-tale marks of slaveseed control. They appeared to have either one of two tasks: mining the rocks for various minerals, or tending to a growth of yorik coral and feeding it to the massive 'fire-bather'; who was contently situated beneath a flow of molten rock. There were only a few guards, since the slaveseed within each of the prisoners ensured full control or death. The warriors didn't really need the seeds to kill them anyways, as it appeared as if the Vong were working the prisoners to death.

"Six, seven, eight," Jaina whispered.

"I've got eight as well, Colonel," Irolia nodded.

"Wryadra, Falhar, advice?" Jaina glanced to the two Yuuzhan Vong.

"We must slay the one controlling the slaveseed response clusters if you wish to rescue the prisoners," Wryadra counseled.

"And that would be which one?"

Wryadra took a moment to watch each of the guards. "There." He pointed to a guard in a yorik-coral, watch-tower-like building at the very top of the lava waterfall. "And there." He motioned to a second guard in a small cluster of Yuuzhan Vong life-forms surrounded by slaves. It was almost as if these other slaves were a living shield. "Both must be killed, or one wave of either of their hands will kill all the slaves."

"The Household Phalanx can handle that," Irolia said, motioning several of her people forward. The Chiss soldiers were armed with blaster rifles with telescopic sights. "On your order."

"The tower has a miniature dovin basal at its base," Falhar interjected. "We will have to take him out the hard way."

"There's no way we can get that close without sounding an alarm. The entire slave pen is an open clearing and the walls are too glassy to get a good handhold," Irolia shook her head.

Falhar looked to Jaina. "Goddess, if you will permit myself and the other warriors from the *Trickster* to remove that guard, we can. A patrol of Yuuzhan Vong warriors looking for survivors or escaped slaves will not draw attention."

"Do it," Jaina nodded. She then motioned to Irolia. "When your people see that the guard is down, take out the other one. Then move on to the remaining Yuuzhan Vong."

"Understood."

The next few minutes were passed in dead silence as the Yuuzhan Vong warriors and Chiss sharpshooters split off. As the Chiss settled into their better vantage points, Jaina watched with baited breath as Falhar led the group of surviving Yuuzhan Vong warriors from the *Trickster* around the perimeter of the slave-pen.

One of the guards noticed them and moved forward, calling out a challenge.

Wryadra, who had stayed behind with Jaina and the others, provided a translation. "He asks who they are."

Falhar replied in harsh tones, to which Wryadra likewise translated. "Falhar says that he hunts for escaped slaves or prisoners from the infidel ship that crashed."

More angry barking as the guard stormed across the blackened rocky ground towards Falhar's group. "The guard is offended that Falhar would even suggest a slave could escape on his watch."

Falhar uncurled his amphistaff in a flash and straightened imposingly. The guard took several steps backwards. "Falhar says that had the warrior been more competent he would be helping the domain conquer the rest of the Empire and not watching over half-dead slaves."

The guard railed away at this, waving his fist in the air. His voice carried loudly in the enclosed grotto. Dutifully, Wryadra provided the gist of the rant. "The guard replies that had Falhar been more competent, then *he* would be with the rest of his Domain on Yuuzhan'tar and not looking for lost slaves that don't exist."

Jaina let out an exasperated sigh. She would be really surprised if she ever heard a Yuuzhan Vong conversation between warriors that didn't have an insult to one's family, a threat of death, a questioning of one's manliness, or a comparison of one's manliness. Though it was expected, it got rather tiring after the first few times around. But when it came down to two low ranking warriors comparing just how incompetent the other was, it was just downright sad.

"Do not worry, Goddess," Wryadra remarked, mistaking Jaina's exasperation for concern. "The other warrior is backing down. Falhar's Domain markings are of a major domain, the guard is from a minor one. Probably one brought in to secure the shapers of Domain Rin. As I said, those shapers are not exactly held in the highest of regard."

"Baby-sitting duties," Jaina winced. "Poor warriors."

"Indeed."

Falhar and the seven surviving warriors of the *Trickster* were eventually allowed past, despite some more insults between the two. The guard returned to the slaves and back-handed one to vent his

frustrations, while Falhar and the others ascended the narrow pathway carved into the rock alongside the flowing river of lava.
Seconds later, Falhar had gained access to the watch tower and had promptly driven his amphistaff through the chest of the guard within. No sooner had the amphistaff emerged, than five streaks of blue light lanced out and blew holes through five Yuuzhan Vong. The surviving two warriors, which included the one who had challenged Falhar, dove for cover. Another blue beam slammed into a large boulder one of the warriors had hidden behind. The boulder erupted, and the force of it caused the warrior to stumble and fall into the stream of lava behind him. Falhar's challenger had only a moment to stare fearfully at the origin of the blue beams, before all five converged on him and disintegrated him.
"Chiss maser heavy rifles, you like, ma'am?" Irolia said, a smug tone in her voice.
"It did the job," Jaina remarked neutrally. She led the rest of the group down towards the bewildered gathering of slaves. They were all covered in soot and wore nothing more than dirtied rags. The Vong didn't see any need to restrain them; slave seed growth stood out on their backs or their chests. They were all emaciated, with heavy bags under their eyes. Many had broken expressions, trudging along almost robotically. As Jaina and the others approached, only some looked up towards them, the rest continued to stare at the ground.
One of the slaves, moved forward to greet them. He stopped, however, when he saw Wryadra and Irolia flanking Jaina. "Chiss? Vong?"
"Don't worry, they're with me." Jaina said. "I'm Colonel Jaina Solo, Jedi Knight and pilot of the Galactic Alliance military."
"Not that any of us aren't grateful, but what's a Jedi doing out here?" The slave said hesitantly.
"What Jedi normally do, Corporal," another slave, who appeared to be in better condition than most of the others, stepped forward. "They save the galaxy. Jedi Solo, I'm Colonel Meizh Vermel. In another situation I would say that it's a pleasure to meet your acquaintance."
"Likewise, Colonel," Jaina shook his outstretched hand. "Are these the only survivors of Borosk?"
Colonel Vermel glanced about at the hundred or so slaves. "Pretty much. Used to be more of us. They recently started taking large groups of us back up to the surface. All human groups. We haven't seen those people again. Do you have a way off this rock?"
"Working on it," Jaina nodded. "Wryadra, can you do anything about those slaveseeds?"

"It depends," Wryadra replied. "I can only remove them if they were implanted less than two days ago. Any longer and it fuses itself to the slave's central nervous system."
"Will we be able to evac all of them?"
Wryadra moved to the control cluster in the middle of the slave-pen. He pushed aside the dead Yuuzhan Vong warrior and studied the various bundles of Vong biots. "If we carry this cluster with us, yes. If any of the slaves stray too far from the gravity waves this emits, the seeds will release a toxin that will kill the slaves."
"Great," Colonel Vermel snorted. "And we're taking his advice are we?"
"Yes," Jaina said sternly. "Wryadra and those warriors," she pointed to Falhar's returning group. "Are our allies. A splinter group of Yuuzhan Vong who don't want to fight for the Supreme Overlord."
The Imperial colonel digested this information for a moment, then folded his arms in front of his chest and lowered his voice. "Can you at least keep them in front of us? Most of the men here saw the planet get pounded. Lost their families, their friends, their entire livelihoods. Friend to you or not, they won't have Vong watching our six."
"I understand, Colonel," Jaina empathized. "I've lost friends in this war too. The quicker we get out of here, the sooner we can get your men some help. Do you know the way out of here?"
"Top of the lava-fall, there's a passage in the rocks that leads up. That's all I know," Colonel Vermel shrugged.
Jaina scanned the surviving slaves, all of whom appeared to be in pretty bad shape. She stood on a nearby rock. "Is there anyone here still in fighting shape?"
After a pause, only nine individuals stepped forward. "We are, ma'am."
Jaina motioned to Irolia, and the Chiss Major moved helped the Galactic Alliance and Chiss commando dole out the spare weapons that they had brought with them from the crashed assault shuttle. She then eyed the rest of the slaves and hid her grimace. It was one thing to lead a group of highly trained and well-fed commandos to safety. It was something else entirely to escort over a hundred, malnourished and broken slaves at the same time.
Colonel Vermel appeared to recognize her dilemma. "Those of us who can fight can stay behind with the others until help arrives. If you and your people can secure the Vong base above, we should last until then."
"What about food and water?"
"There's an Imperial bunker a kilometer from here that survived the attack. I know because I was in it when the asteroids started to hit. It's fully stocked with enough rations to last us a couple of weeks. Once

you give the all-clear, we'll go out and retrieve those supplies. Don't worry, Jedi Solo. We'll be fine."
"We'll give you whatever supplies we can spare in the meantime," Jaina motioned to the supplies her team had taken from the assault shuttle. "I'll leave you to your people, Colonel."
"Ma'am," Colonel Vermel saluted Jaina respectfully.
Jaina handed him a comlink. "Stand by for the 'coast is clear' signal. My people will try to minimize the number of Vong on the surface."
"Appreciate it. Good luck, Jedi."
=}VIII{= =}VIII{=
"Vong-Girl to One-Twenty-Eights. Let's do this nice and easy." Tahiri said, leading the squadron of elite TIE Interceptors from the very outskirts of the Muunilinst system. Behind them, the lone Star Destroyer and their base of operations, the *Bombard*, waited for their return.
"We'll follow you in Vong-Girl," the clipped and precise tones of her Imperial wingmen sounded.
In the distance, the eight capital ships of the Yuuzhan Vong attack Force continued to orbit Muunilist. Tahiri could feel the anger spike from several of the pilots as the ravaged state of the planet soon became clear. They were ever the professionals, however, and the comm-channels stayed silent.
"Switch into attack formation now," Tahiri commanded. "One pass only, that's an order."
The discipline of the pilots forced them to put duty ahead of their own personal feelings, and she received the clicks over the comm confirming that they had received her orders. The Interceptors accelerated far beyond the speeds capable of Tahiri's X-wing, and unleashed a volley of green on the coralskippers escorting the capital ships. The nimble fighters rolled and weaved around the alien ships, nearly slagging three a piece before their first and only attack run was finished. As one of the escorting picket-ships moved in to cut off the Interceptors' escape path, Tahiri's X-wing caught up and she unleashed two Shadow Bombs directly into the picket-ship's path. The sudden flare from the heavy warheads ripped apart the bridge of the vessel, and sent the dying remains of the body into a decaying orbit.
Tahiri looped her ship around and began to fall back with the rest of the Interceptors in a hasty retreat. Streaming behind them were several Mataloks and supporting frigates.
"This is Vong-Girl, fish is on the hook," Tahiri reported, ignoring the long-distance plasma fire that began to rock her ship. The faster Interceptors were already well on their way out of the system, and the

only Yuuzhan Vong vessels with the speed to catch up were the coralskippers.
But that was where their *Victory*-class Star Destroyer came in. It unleashed a punishing barrage of cover-fire, lighting up the vacuum of space with the sizzling blue ion bolts and blistering green turbolaser streaks. The first coralskippers on scene didn't stand a chance as they were vaporized by the sudden barrage. Other coralskippers suddenly found themselves in the Star Destroyer's specially modified tractor beams and were used as shields against the incoming fire of their compatriots. Tahiri and the rest of the Interceptors quickly docked with the *Bombard*, and the cruiser swiftly maneuvered out of the way and into hyperspace.
=}IX{= =}IX{=
Only a half-hour had passed before another Star Destroyer dropped out of hyperspace at the edge of the Muunilinst system. It was the *Stormhawk*, a retrofitted *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer and one of the survivors of the initial battle at Muunilinst. The heavy plasma scoring and multiple hull breaches it had sustained in that fight were still visible; making anyone who saw it think that it was carrying out one last act of defiance. From its underbelly swarmed three squadrons of fighters and four DX-9 assault transports. Instead of hanging back to pick them up later, the *Stormhawk* continued on into the system behind its entourage.
The three fighter squadrons weren't just any squadrons, but completely made up of TIE Defenders. Colonel Vessery, along with Stranger and Interloper squadron had survived the trap, and were joined by a Defender squadron from Admiral Pryl's taskforce. Aiding the considerable firepower of these ships was the four DX-9 assault transports following them. Each transport could fire a dozen torpedoes in a single volley from its launchers attached to either side of the main fuselage, and had been filled with enough warheads to unleash this devastating barrage twice.
The goal of the *Stormhawk* and its escort? To hunt themselves a Vong capital ship.
The ships stopped just outside of Muunilinst's gravity well and began pouring laser fire onto the nearest Yuuzhan Vong support vessels. Not wanting a repeat of the previous hit-and-run, the Yuuzhan Vong immediately sent a Matalok and one of the battleship equivalents to engage this new threat. The Yuuzhan Vong couldn't have known that Waxarn Kel was on the bridge of the *Stormhawk* and that his followers were in the assault shuttles ready to coordinate a fiery attack the Yuuzhan Vong wouldn't soon forget.

As the Matalok and Uro-Ik V'alh battleship moved to engage, the TIE Defenders, *Stormhawk,* and assault shuttles, unleashed a blistering barrage of warheads, nearly six dozen in all, all the while focusing their laser fire on the Yuuzhan Vong capital ships. Some of the warheads detonated prematurely, right above the voids protecting the ships. The Matalok's void defenses were too overloaded by the continuous laser fire to withstand the energy of these excess detonations and had to dissipate for a fraction of a second to renew their integrity. That was a fraction of a second too long. Wave after wave of torpedoes slammed into the heavy command cruiser, relentlessly blowing holes deeper and deeper into the ship. It may have been overkill, but the point was to leave a lasting impression.

The *Stormhawk* and its escort didn't even stick around to see the end result. The moment they had emptied their missile bays, they had all retreated back into the safety of hyperspace. Had they remained, they would have seen the Matalok erupt in a blazing fireball, and the Uro-Ik V'alh lose its entire port side to the multiple detonations of dozens of warheads. The coralskippers that had moved up with these ships had also found themselves in a world of hurt as explosions, too many to count, erupted all around them and blew their squadrons to pieces.

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The final straw for the Yuuzhan Vong fleet over Muunilinst was when a third Star Destroyer arrived in system and began firing its turbolasers right away. Like the *Stormhawk,* the *Judicator,* had survived the Muunilinst engagement, and was not without its own scars. Deliberately left unrepaired, the *Judicator* made all sorts of fuss to entice the Yuuzhan Vong into attacking it.

This time the Yuuzhan Vong didn't even wait for it to deploy fighters. Instead, the remaining six Yuuzhan Vong capital ships, and the dozens of support vessels, streamed towards this latest threat en masse. The Star Destroyer leapt to hyperspace, and the Yuuzhan Vong followed.

=}XI{= =}XI{=

"Moff Sarreti, hyperwave transmission from the *Judicator*. The Vong have responded to our provocations and are en route now."

"Hyperwave from the *Stormhawk*'s task group indicates they had at least one successful capital ship kill," another officer reported. With the HoloNet buoys down, the only means of communication left with the less advanced hyperwave. Though it was faster-than-light, the range of a hyperwave transmission was extremely short; at best used for neighboring system-to-system communications."

"The *Bombard* has returned. No casualties."

The minutes ticked by, and then the *Stormhawk* dropped out of hyperspace and rejoined the rest of the fleet. Everyone stood at the ready, over their controls or in the cockpits of their fighters.

Using lessons learned from the previous engagement, the taskforce's Star Destroyers were evenly spaced several light-seconds apart. They were close enough to support each other, but far enough that another hyperspace-capable asteroid wouldn't be able to do much damage.

The *Judicator* arrived, its sleek profile swinging about and positioning itself in the center of the Star Destroyer formation, directly in front of the *Wrack*. A nod from Jacen was all that was needed for the final part of the plan to fall into place.

"Signal the *Wrack* and begin interdiction," Moff Sarreti barked. "Interdiction field has been activated."

The Yuuzhan Vong fleet was violently pulled out of hyperspace and, instead of seeing the ragged remains of the three surviving ships of the Battle of Muunilinst, found themselves directly in the line of fire of an Imperial fleet led by eleven, very angry Star Destroyers.

The Yuuzhan Vong force frantically tried to maneuver out of the trap, but found that they couldn't jump to hyperspace. The alien ships promptly unleashed their waves of coralskippers, and homed in on the gravimetric anchor that was the *Wrack*. Plasma flashed as the Yuuzhan Vong desperately tried to punch a hole through the Imperial line.

But the Imperials had been ready. Lasers, missiles, and torpedoes, streaked out from the line of Imperial vessels and crashed into the ambushed Yuuzhan Vong vessels. Charred coral flew every which way as one ship after another fell to the intense barrage. As the Yuuzhan Vong made a beeline for the Interdictor cruiser, the other Star Destroyers began to close in around them in a lethal web.

Another Matalok exploded under the combined might of the Empire. The last battleship was ripped in two by a constant barrage of missiles. As the coralskippers tried to cover their capital ships, TIE fighters of all sorts screamed into the fray, pounding the alien vessels with repeated strafes of green.

The *Wrack* continued to maneuver behind one Star Destroyer to the next, keeping the Yuuzhan Vong trapped within its gravity well, but at the same time keeping itself well covered. The few coralskippers and support ships that had managed to get by its screen proved no match for its guns.

A third Matalok splintered apart. The Yuuzhan Vong fleet dwindling with every passing second. The rest seemed to realize that they couldn't get through to the Interdictor and began a hasty retreat towards the outer edges of the system.

They didn't make it far.
The Imperials pursued them, stitching the Yuuzhan Vong ships with relentless barrages of green turbolasers and missiles. One by one, the Yuuzhan Vong vessels disappeared in brilliant balls of flame. Finally, the last surviving frigate made an abrupt U-turn and tried to ram the nearest Imperial vessel. It was blasted apart before it even got close. And then silence fell.
"Sensors?" Moff Sarreti said calmly.
"Detecting no active enemy vessels," the operator said with a grin in his voice. "We did it!"
"Yes we did."
"Receiving hyperwave transmission from Admiral Pryl's messenger ship. Grand Admiral Pellaeon's taskforce has returned to Bastion and is requesting a status update."
"Let them know what happened," Moff Sarreti said, finally relaxing as he saw the burnt out hulk of a Yuuzhan Vong cruiser drift by the bridge. "And set a course for Bastion. We need to rid the Empire of the Yuuzhan Vong once and for all."
=} Chapter End {=
A\N: Two chapters left for the Imperial/Mando arc.
Thanks again for following me for this long, please leave a review if you have the time and energy to do so =)

ADA 45

Forty-Five
=}I{= =}I{=
Yuuzhan Vong assistant tertiary garrison sub-commander Gravil Carr, of the fifth auxiliary support division, eighth scourge, of the Yun-Txiin Battle Group on Bandomeer, supervised the two hundred warriors he had at his command. They had their own private barracks, grown on a cliff-side, overlooking a vast ocean that covered half of the planet. It was an aesthetically pleasing view, and the sight of an actual ocean was welcomed after the distance he and his forces had traveled. Equally welcome was the sight of all of his warriors training hard for the battle that was to come. The rocky clearing was a broad expanse of flat land that allowed for ample room for all sorts of exercises. He knew little of the Mandalorians besides the fact that they were said to be the most fearsome and skilled soldiers this galaxy had to offer. He definitely couldn't wait to test his own mettle against them. After countless victories against the very incompetent and inefficient forces

the infidels had fed piece-meal to the might of Domain Carr, Gravil hungered for a *real* opponent.
"Ummm, excuse me!" A female voice called out in the language of the same infidels he had only just been cursing.
Gravil and most of his men stopped their exercises and turned as one. Standing on the edge of the cliff was a young infidel girl with brown hair and yellow eyes that stood out against her earthen-toned skin. Her petite form looked even smaller due to the constricting, armored jumpsuit she was wearing. She had on some type of headset, with a camera-like device slotted right above her ear. With no visible weapon, mode of transportation, or backup, Gravil wondered just how a girl several heads shorter than he managed to just appear on the edge of the cliff. The sub-commander hesitantly glanced at his men for answers, but they too seemed just as confused.
"Hi," the teen said with a hesitant wave. "Can you all understand me?"
"We have tizowyrms implanted within us," Gravil growled deeply, straightening to his full height and flexing his muscles threateningly. Rather than appear intimidated by his heavily muscular and scarred form, the girl seemed brightened by this news. "That's great! Okay, look, my friends all told me that I was stupid for doing this, but I just had to give all of you warriors a chance."
"A chance?" Gravil repeated slowly.
"Uh huh. If you lay down your weapons now and surrender, your lives will be spared." The girl said solemnly her yellow eyes sweeping over the ranks of warriors surrounding her.
The warriors all blinked at her in disbelief. Mistaking their silence for a fault in translation, the girl began to speak very slowly, acting out her words in an almost ridiculously exaggerated fashion. "If you," she pointed to them. "Surrender now." She mimicked unhooking an amphistaff, placing it to the ground, and raising her hands. "Your lives…"
"We understood you the first time!" Gravil barked, if only to halt the ridiculousness he was seeing.
"Oh good, and?"
Gravil couldn't believe the gall of the girl. "And if you tell us how *you* got to where you are, infidel, *your* life might be spared."
"So you won't surrender?"
"We are Yuuzhan Vong. We will not," Gravil said to the approving grunts of his subordinates.
The girl's expression fell as she sighed and averted her eyes from the warriors. "Oh well, it was worth a shot."

Gravil let his amphistaff uncurl from around his wrist and snap rigid. He was going to teach this foolish girl a lesson. He took a step forward, and then paused when he heard an odd whooshing sound fill the air. Like the sound of an infidel ship taking off, only less intense. The other warriors heard it too. The sound was coming from behind the girl over the edge of the sheer cliff wall.
"What…?"
Suddenly, a line of heavily-armored figures shot up from the cliff-side, each buoyed by some sort of rocket strapped to their backs.
Gravil was dumbstruck.
"I warned you," the young girl said, and even Gravil could hear the definite tone of regret in her voice.
Before the warrior had had a chance to do or say anything else, the wall of armored figures each extended one arm and pressed a button. A wave of projectiles flew out at a speed faster than his eye could track. He definitely felt and heard the resounding explosions that followed, however. The shockwave toppled him over, and when he looked back, there were multiple craters where two hundred Yuuzhan Vong warriors had once been. The sound of infidel blaster weapons rang out, fast and incessant. Survivors of the missile barrage were picked off one by one, with deadly accuracy.
One of the armored soldiers landed directly in front of his sprawled form. Gravil looked up and saw an expressionless metal helmet, a green one with a T-shaped visor, staring down at him. The soldier extended an arm out. Through his shock, Gravil saw the barrel of a blaster approach until it was pressed right between his eyes. All around he could hear the sound of the others dying.
A blaster pistol whined, and Gravil joined them.
=}II{= =}II{=
"This is *Cabur* advance unit, southern barracks is secure."
Sannah gazed about the scorched battlefield with great sadness as Dinua reported the situation in. There had been little chance that the Yuuzhan Vong would surrender, but still it was a significant loss of life. She couldn't think of the Yuuzhan Vong as animals, or butchers, or whatever else most of the galaxy thought of them. She had sworn to herself that she won't kill any sentient beings period, and Yuuzhan Vong were living people just like humans or P'w'eck. But just because *she* wouldn't kill didn't mean she saw the necessity of it at times. She had given the Yuuzhan Vong that chance to lay down their arms and walk away. They didn't and paid the ultimate price.
The fifteen-man *Ori'ramikade* force had literally laid waste to a ground force much, much larger than they. Now, the only thing left of the

company-sized force of Yuuzhan Vong were charred and blaster-marked corpses. Nearly all the intact Yuuzhan Vong bodies were missing heads, evidence of just how accurate the elite Mandalorians were. The Mandalorians had been frightening to watch in action. All their movements precise, their discipline and the mechanical-like way they tore through the Yuuzhan Vong ranks, awe-inspiring. They had already worked out their targets ahead of time and had utilized their wrist-mounted rockets in such a way as to maximize the damage and area affected.

"Copy that. Beviin and Aran advanced units have likewise secured their targets. Proceed to phase two of the operation.

"Orders received Sentinel, proceeding to rendezvous point and then heading on to primary target." Dinua lowered her hand from her helmet comlink, watching in the distance as her men razed the Yuuzhan Vong barracks with their flamers.

Looming several kilometers inland, between the start of two mountain ranges, was a massive Yuuzhan Vong facility bristling with all sorts of defenses. The upper most spires of the structure supported an intricate network of landing platforms, most of which were occupied. The lower structures were the stables for the Yuuzhan Vong's famed assault creatures, such as the *rakamat,* Fire Breathers, and the like. It was a large staging area, even by Yuuzhan Vong standards, supporting the tens of thousands of warriors and living siege creatures within.

The attack plan was relatively simple. Attach explosives on vital structures, bring down the mountain sides on the Yuuzhan Vong base, and watch as everything went 'boom'.

Sannah and Dinua, however, had the harder task of finding and freeing Doran during that small window that came after the planting of the explosives and before they were detonated. It was made harder by the fact that Doran's presence was muffled in the Force. Sannah only knew that he was somewhere in that base, and nothing more.

To some people, attacking a base full of tens of thousands of warriors with only a small strike force of forty-five commandos, was more than suicidal. Attacking said base with no air support or guarantee of an evac was just insane. The chance of success was ridiculously small. But at the same time, if they didn't do something, these thousands of Yuuzhan Vong troops and assault creatures would soon be employed on the Mandalorian home world and no doubt kill many, many Mandalorian civilians.

A second group, the crew of the Yuuzhan Vong picket-ship, Kreda, and other *Ori'ramikade* recruits, had the task of destroying an orbiting Worldship. At the disposal of these thirty other Mandalorians were

three transport vessels and enough explosives to blow up a small moon. The hardest part was covertly planting the explosives in such a way as to completely annihilate the Yuuhzan Vong behemoth. Vacuum-sealed Mandalorian armor was employed for half of the team, who skirted about the surface of the large ship planting their payloads. The other half had the unenviable job of actually moving through the ship and planting their explosives at vital junctures designated by the crew of the picket-ship. Despite the fact that this was one of the younger, smaller, Yuuzhan Vong Worldships, the weapons it could bring to bear were still immensely powerful. If the Supercommandos wanted to give their people a fighting chance, the ship had to go.

Of course, everything was easier said than done.

Dinua double-clicked her comm, and the fourteen other Mandalorians finished up their sweep of the area and fell back into formation.

"Phase two is a go," Dinua informed. "Parjin, Daras, you two have point. Akal, Dhabur, bring up the rear."

The Mandalorian front men quickly set a fast pace as the group moved in complete silence. Sannah kept up with the fast sprints of the Mandalorians with ease. Even over the harsh, rocky soil of Bandomeer, Sannah had no problem matching the Mandalorian Supercommandos around her, stride for stride. Their path led them away from the actual Yuuzhan Vong base and around to the side of one of the many mountains flanking it. The pathway disappeared on more than one occasion, and they were often forced to free-climb their way over the jagged, slate-grey rocks. Again, Sannah had no problems at all, deftly scaling the massive rocky wall and feeling immensely proud that she hadn't once needed to call on the Force to augment her strength.

The trip to the mountains, and the ascension up it was a laborious and time-consuming process. When they had razed the Yuuzhan Vong barracks at the cliff-side, the sun had only just begun to rise. Now that they were nearing their destination, the sun was beginning its downward path once more. Sweat dripped from Sannah's brow as she pulled herself up onto the final ledge.

Other Mandalorians followed suit, taking a moment to finally catch a breather. The ledge they were on led to a small and almost unnoticeable gap in the rocky surface of the mountain. The gap led to a large cavern within the mountain, and to a stockpiled armory of Mandalorian weaponry. One of the many caches Boba Fett had created shortly after the Yuuzhan Vong had approached him, it was created expressly for the purpose it was about to be used for. Namely, when the time arose, to aid in the removal of the Yuuzhan Vong presence on Bandomeer.

The group dropped down into the cave and saw that they were the second to arrive. Advanced unit, *Aran* was already in the process of stocking up on ammunition and heavy weaponry.
"*Oya* Commander," a red armored Mandalorian greeted Dinua with a fist clasped to his chest.
"Dinuzi," Dinua acknowledged. "You made it here in fine time."
"The outsiders Jedi Sarkin-Tainer had us bring along were very useful," the Mandalorian jerked a thumb in the direction of two figures.
Sannah followed his gesture and blinked. The two could not have been more physically different if they had tried. One was a tall, young woman with light, freckled skin. Her shoulder-length blond hair was tied back in a very loose ponytail, which accented her bare shoulders. Unlike the heavily armored Mandalorian soldiers around her, she wore a black, sleeveless synthcloth top that bared her toned mid-section and showed off equally toned arms. Attached to her utility belt were a lightsaber, a vibroblade, and a blaster, a statement of the young woman's versatility.
Her companion was her exact opposite. A massive, beast of a man, wearing what looked suspiciously like the head of a Yuuzhan Vong warrior, cleaned out and used as a hat. The humanoid male was a good half a meter taller than the blond woman, with biceps and quadriceps nearly as large as her head. He was a middle-aged, grizzled looking man, with multiple scars in the weathered skin of his face and body, and a necklace of sharp teeth around his neck. A large bladed weapon was strapped to his back, and several larger knives dangled from a fancy belt around his waist.
"They're the help Tyria called in?"
"They are. The big guy's a Cilare," the red-armored Mandalorian replied in amusement. "Heck of a fighter. Never thought I'd actually see someone bang two *Vongese* heads together. Made a rather amusing squishing sound the first time."
Sannah smiled faintly at that. She could have gone without the knowledge. The Yuuzhan Vong head the big man was wearing was off-putting enough.
The two figures looked up from where they had been arming themselves and noted Sannah's non-Mandalorian appearance. The young woman finished strapping on a belt of blaster packs, while the man slung a belt of detonators around his massive shoulders, and they both made their way over to the Melodie Jedi.
"Hi," the blond woman greeted.
"Hi?" Sannah glanced apprehensively at the woman's large shadow.

Noting Sannah's distracted state, the blond woman grinned and patted the man's arm affectionately. "Don't mind Arbeloa, he's about as harmless as they come. Provided you're not a Vong of course. His hat's what happened to the last Vong commander who tried to enslave him."
"Right," Sannah said faintly, unable to look away from the man, or his grizzly hat, as Arbeloa smoothed his mustache and raised a thick eyebrow in amusement.
"My name's Kaye Galifridian. 'Kaye' is fine though," the blond said, shooing her companion away. "You must be Sannah. Tyria told me about you and Doran. Don't worry, I'm sure we'll get him back. After what he did for me, I still have a debt to pay off."
Wondering why Doran seemed to have a knack of running into beautiful, very attractive women in his adventures, Sannah just nodded in response. It was hard not to be insecure when you turned into a fish in five years and knew that your boyfriend would be spending the rest of his life with some other woman. It was times like this when some part of her mind couldn't help but wonder if the girl she was meeting was the one who would take her place at Doran's side, much like she had taken Dinua's. Sure her fish-turning moment was still five years away, but the fear that Doran would wake up one day and decide that he wanted more than just the five years she could give him was still something that secretly gnawed away at her.
Kaye smiled and placed an affectionate hand on Sannah's arm. "Don't worry. Doran's just a very good friend. As attractive as he is, he's a bit young for me."
Sannah blushed. "What…but I didn't…I never said anything about…"
"Force sensitive," Kaye tapped her lightsaber. "Partially trained though. My brother, and then later Doran, taught me enough to get by."
Sannah closed her eyes and tried to disappear as her cheeks burned.
"Hey, it's okay. I'd feel the same way too, nothing to be embarrassed about." Kaye chuckled. "Arbeloa and I ran into Tyria and Doran during one of our raids on a Yuuzhan Vong ship in the Artorias system. Both our ships ended up getting shot down and we spent some time playing hide-and-seek with the Yuuzhan Vong garrison. Not easy when you're traveling with Arbeloa, but we managed to do it anyways. We ended up not only taking out that small garrison, we managed to free thousands of my people being used as slave labor."
"Your people?' Sannah tilted her head.
"My people. Artorias was one of the first planets hit in the war," Kaye said, a nostalgic expression fluttering across her face. "We've been keeping up a low-level resistance, but the system is still a Vong stronghold."

"I'm sorry," Sannah whispered.
"No, it's okay. We're stable enough that Arbeloa and I could come out here and help, and that was mostly thanks to Tyria and Doran. When we took out the garrison, we got rid of the most brutal of Yuuzhan Vong commanders, and he was replaced by a slightly incompetent and more merciful one."
"Then it's a good thing that…"
More movement at the entrance of the cave, and the third Mandalorian group arrived. Two non-Mandalorians, dropped through first. Of the two, one was an older teenage girl with long, dark, hair, and a lightsaber strapped to her side. The other, a chestnut-brown haired man, sported two blasters. He had on a heavy black coat, while the teenage girl wore a yellow tunic-like dress that looked to be made of some sort of animal skin. It was immediately clear that they were most definitely another unlikely duo.
"Okay, what is it with Tyria and her ability to gather strange people from all over?" Kaye said aloud as the rest of the Mandalorians poured in.
"I was thinking the same thing," Sannah smiled.
The newcomers made their way over to Kaye and Sannah.
"Is this the support group for non-Mandalorians?" The male said jovially. "If I ever needed a reminder to shed a few pounds, hanging out with the Mandos will definitely do it. Uldir Lochett at your service."
Sannah shook his outstretched hand. "Sannah. Uldir was it? I think Anakin and Tahiri mentioned you a couple of times."
Uldir grimaced. "Good things I hope?"
"Of course," Sannah smiled. "You're like their number one best friend. Last comm-chat I had with them we got to talking about old friends and they were worried about what had happened to you. You must have left quite an impression."
"Yeah…being duped by a techno-terrorist and running around trying to convincing myself and others that I had Force powers would do that," Uldir scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "I hope they're doing well."
"Last that I know," Sannah nodded.
Uldir smiled at the young woman next to Sannah. "A pleasure to meet you."
"I'm Kaye." The blond bowed her head politely and the gestured to the lightsaber clipped to the belt of Uldir's partner. "Your companion, she's a Jedi?"
"A real one, unlike me," Uldir nodded, stepping back so his companion could introduce herself.

"Klin-Fa Gi, at your service," the dark-haired teen said sarcastically.
"A pleasure to meet you," Kaye said politely. "This war brings all sorts of people together, doesn't it?"
"You're telling me," Klin-Fa muttered, looking at Uldir with a slight grin. "If it wasn't for the war, I wouldn't be traveling with this clumsy lug."
Sannah could sense the obvious Force bond between the two, but before she could ask about the story behind her statement, the Mandalorians finished their preparations.
"Alright *Mando'ade*!" Dinua called out. "Get your weapons and move to your designated locations. You all know the drill. On the signal from Sentinel, we launch our attack."
"See you on the battlefield," Uldir winked at Sannah. He and Klin-Fa bowed and moved away with their Mandalorian unit.
"Careful out there, Sannah." Kaye gave a parting wave to the Melodie teen as she and Arbeloa followed their group of Mandalorians out of the cave.
"You as well," Sannah called out.
"You ready, *ner vod*?" Dinua said, wielding a very deadly looking blaster rifle.
Sannah nodded once. "Always."
"Then let's go."
=}III{= =}III{=
Sannah took a break from her meditation to rub her hands together for warmth. She used the moment to gaze out from her position at the very top of the snow-capped mountain to watch the sun set into the distant ocean. It was a beautiful display as oranges, yellows, blues, and purples filled the rapidly changing sky.
She breathed into her hands, needing the added warmth. Her thin, synthleather gloves were no match for the elements, and for once she was envious of the Mandalorians' armor. Sannah had no doubt that Dinua, Jintar, and the others were snug and warm in the thick protective layers of cloth and metal while they sat perched in the snow, awaiting the signal to act.
It's not to say that things hadn't been eventful during their wait. Sometime after the first hour, the Yuuzhan Vong had stumbled across the remains of their handy work. They watched in some amusement as Yuuzhan Vong patrol ships relentlessly traversed the coastal regions and surrounding lands in search of the perpetrators. Patrols of Yuuzhan Vong warriors had been moving back and forth, non-stop, since the burnt out barracks and hundreds of warrior corpses had been discovered. As the hours passed, the patrols were sent further and further away from the base. It was clear that whoever was in charge

was expecting to come across a large detachment of soldiers, heavily armed and capable enough to slaughter the hundreds of warriors that had occupied the three barracks at the base's perimeter. The idea that less than fifty commandos would even dare attack his base apparently never entered his mind.
Unfortunately, the same commander was just as clearly paranoid about traitors on the inside. Sannah had equipped herself with a headset unit of macrobinoculars at the Mandalorian cache, and it had been through that unit that she had been forced to watch what looked to be a good portion of the base's Shamed One population brought out and executed in cold blood. The bodies were fed to the pens that held the *rakamat* and other siege creatures. Dozens more Shamed Ones were placed in cages by these creatures, the obvious next meal.
"Still can't get a fix on Doran's location?" Dinua whispered under her breath.
For the past few hours Sannah had been in deep mediation, reaching out to her best friend with increasing desperation. He was hurting, and badly. He was trying to be strong and failing miserably. Their bond was extremely weak as whatever the Vong were doing to him appeared to be affecting his mental state. It had taken every ounce of strength Sannah had had to not cry out his name or panic. Her heart had been pounding and she had broken out into a cold sweat. Yet, during a moment of clarity, her bond with Doran snapped back to its iron-strong strength and for several seconds, Sannah was able to feel exactly where in the base he was.
The Melodie teen nodded in response to Dinua's question. "He's at a sub-level of the main structure."
"Wonderful," Dinua breathed sarcastically. She tapped her helmet-comm and relayed the information to the other two teams. Jintar, in the same team as Uldir and Klin-Fa, replied back with an affirmative click. They were further down the mountains, by the landing platforms. Kaye responded in a similar fashion, her team at ground level and physically closer to Doran than the other groups. Only, they had to contend with thousands of warriors and security measures before they could get to him.
Another message followed only second later. "*This is Sentinel. All assault units, proceed to mission objectives. Signal when bombs are in place. Evac zones still open despite increased Vong activity. We'll be on station for another thirty."*
Sannah watched as Dinua's hand curled into a tight fist. "*Cabur* copies."

The Mandalorian leader dropped her hands to her side and looked to the others. "You heard Sentinel, plant the bombs. Jedi Sannah and I have a personal mission to take care of. We'll see you all back at the LZ."

Cabur team, responsible for bring down the side of the mountain onto the Yuuzhan Vong base, saluted in acknowledgement, then quickly went to work strategically situating very volatile payloads into the crags and crevices of the snow-capped mountain.

Sannah and Dinua threw a very long length of rope off the mountainside and began a rapid descent to the lower levels. Within seven minutes, they were only several dozen meters above the upper landing platform. A couple of Yuuzhan Vong ships had just come in to offload tired troops and crew members. In addition to the ships, nearly a dozen others were using the broad expanses of coral as a landing pad.

"It'll take too long to sneak by them," Sannah muttered.

"You'll have to kill, you know," Dinua whispered back as they peered out from behind a large boulder. "Mind tricks won't work on these guys."

"Maybe not," Sannah motioned to two shadowy figures agilely moving beneath the coral landing platforms.

Dinua switched her helmet's sight to night vision and was able to make out both Uldir and Klin-Fa's forms. "What are they doing?"

Sannah closed her eyes and reached out to Klin-Fa, who promptly, mentally, answered Dinua's question. "They're bringing down the platform ahead of schedule. They hope that we can use the chaos to recover Doran and get out of here."

"So much for stealth," Dinua sighed, readying her blaster and taking cover back behind the boulder.

Uldir and Klin-Fa beat a hasty retreat down a supporting strut of coral. Seconds later, a series of deafening explosions blew apart the landing platforms and their support. The coral platforms sagged, and then collapsed under the weight of the dozen ships on them; a rain of fiery coral and debris crashing down onto the base.

Alarmed cries sprang up all around the base as warriors were roused by the thundering roar. Jintar, and surprisingly enough, the rest of his Mandalorian squad, jetted down through the cloud of black smoke. Rocket-launchers from the Mandalorian cache were resting on their shoulders, with a spare strapped to their backs—each Merr Sonn launcher containing three missiles. No armed force in the galaxy, not even a group as disciplined as the Yuuzhan Vong, enjoyed being the subject of a forty-five rocket barrage; especially so when the

Mandalorians discarded their first launcher and brought their second launchers into position. The smoke trails of the second salvo of missiles intertwined with the first as the entire base was lit up in another intense bombardment of high explosives. The Mandalorians discarded the second launcher, reactivated their jetpacks, and began firing their wrist-mounted repeating blasters at the base's stunned population. Between the rapid fire bursts of their guns and roar of their jetpacks, the Mandalorians released thermal detonator after thermal detonator over the hapless crowd as if they were one-man bombers; further adding to the chaos. Yuuzhan Vong warriors were falling left and right, scrambling to put up some type of defense amidst the hail of yellow bolts of plasma and bright flashes of flame.

The Mandalorians weren't the only threat they had to worry about though. Uldir and Klin-Fa appeared to be flitting in and out of battle. Klin-Fa's gold lightsaber flickered to life for a single second to behead a surprised Yuuzhan Vong officer, then extinguished. A new target, the blade flickered on again. She was like a wraith, drifting in and out of the night's shadows and bringing down warriors with a single, methodological stroke of her blade. All the while the red blaster bolts and unique sound from Uldir's dual blaster pistols stood out against the storm of yellow plasma being fired by the Mandalorians. Uldir's weapons made up in quality what they lacked in quantity. Six, seven, eight ruby red, rapid-fire, darts stitched one warrior, dropping his twitching form. Another five shots on the run managed to take out two more warriors. Uldir was in constant motion, adding to the confusion and chaos.

As the Yuuzhan Vong tried to regroup, a fearsome roar rang out. Several warriors turned around, and the last thing they saw was an enraged *rakamat* bearing down on them. Five of the siege beasts had somehow been freed from their enclosure and appeared to be running amuck. That is, until the figures of Kaye and Arbeloa appeared on one, the imprisoned Shamed Ones on two others, and slaves that had been held by the Yuuzhan Vong on the remaining two. The Mandalorians who had been with Kaye and Arbeloa were flying cover, heavy repeating rifles mowing down rows of Yuuzhan Vong in a heartbeat. The early night's air was full of Yuuzhan Vong screams of pain and panic. Orders rapidly being barked were cut off in a gargle as a Mandalorian picked off another officer. In space, Yuuzhan Vong warriors depended on yammosks to guide them. On the ground, it was the officers in charge who led them. No officers meant no orders. No orders meant a lot of confused and bewildered Yuuzhan Vong running around in the dark.

In the midst of all the chaos, Dinua and Sannah quickly moved across the ground towards the main structure. They were challenged by several warriors. Dinua mowed her challengers down with pin-point shots between their eyes. Sannah's own lightsaber flared to life and literally disarmed and then maimed the legs her attackers. Charred arms and legs, cut off at the knees and elbows, fell to the ground next to their stunned owners as Sannah walked by them without another word.
"Eighteen minutes," Dinua warned as they entered the building. "We can make it."
They burst through the membrane door, startling a Yuuzhan Vong shaper who had been in the process of leaving. Dinua pressed her blaster into the shaper's forehead and forced him further into the building. "You have a very good friend of mine prisoner. Where?"
The shaper's lips retracted and he opened his mouth to spit out a curse.
The blast whined.
"Wrong answer." Ignoring the body as it fell to the ground behind her, Dinua looked up at the pitch-black passage ways before them. There were multiple paths and they didn't have time to explore them all.
"Sannah?"
The dark-haired Jedi closed her eyes and focused. "Come on, Adventure Boy, give me a sign."
Not helping was the rumbling and gunfire that could still be heard quite clearly through the thin doorway behind them. Nor was the sound of heavy footsteps as the building's garrison hurried out to join the battle.
"Sannah!"
"Follow me!" Sannah said quickly. She called on the Force to guide her as she sprinted down one of the passage ways. Half-way through it, she came to a skidding stop at a ventilation shaft. "This leads to the lower levels."
"And Doran?"
"And Doran." Sannah sliced away the covering with her lightsaber and jumped down the shaft without any hesitation.
After a short slide, they came out in the middle of a very similar corridor, only several meters beneath the surface.
"He's nearby," Sannah breathed, her eyes darting left and right as she sought Doran out.
Dinua followed Sannah's almost mechanical footsteps, the young Jedi drawn magnetically towards her best friend. The two soon found themselves in a laboratory of some sort, with vials of liquid, tissue samples, and bubbling beakers laid out all around. What was most

disturbing was the sheer volume of tissue samples displayed before them.
Dinua stopped by a rack of vials. There was no mistaking what was in it, or the very large amount of it. "Blood."
Sannah glanced at a vial, but then something else caught her attention. On an organic tray of some sort was a thick lock of Doran's hair. Next to it were thin cut sections of muscle, and a fragment of bone. Sannah started to examine another pile of tissue, but then recoiled when she realized that it was freshly striped sheets of skin neatly folded into a bundle.
"Doran!" Sannah cried out, quickly looking around the room. There were more corridors leading out, each one ending in a cell of some sort.
"If I didn't know any better," Dinua said, her sharp eyes examining the samples. "I'd think that the Vong here are trying to figure out what gives the Jedi their powers."
"*And we were successful,"* an accented voice spoke up from the path they had come from.
Both teens spun around. Dinua tried to fire a shot, but her heavy blaster was yanked from her hand by an invisible force. A shadowy figure caught the gun with one hand. Sannah's saber flew out from her utility belt and landed in the figure's other hand. The figure threw the weapons over his shoulder and emerged from the shadows.
The figure was a Yuuzhan Vong shaper, but not completely. The shaper had either experimented on himself, or had been experimented on, as was evident by his appearance. His brain was clearly visible from beneath a thin membrane, and foreign tissue appeared to have been grafted onto it. Surgical scars on his abdomen revealed other alternations.
"*Thanks to our experimentation on the Jeedai, we have successfully transferred his powers, his knowledge, to me! The work of Domain Kwaad has not died, but lives on in me!"* The Yuuzhan Vong held out his hand again, and both Dinua and Sannah were thrown back into a near wall by a blast of Force energy. Dinua stayed down, seemingly out cold.
"You experimented on Doran," Sannah breathed, struggling back to her feet. She pointed towards the table covered with the samples, her hand shaking in anger. "What did you do to him?"
"*It does not matter, Fish Girl,"* the Shaper said with a sneer.
Sannah's heart nearly stopped in her chest. "What…what?"
"What's wrong, Sannah? Is that not the name the Jeedai male calls you? He called out your name often when we harvested what we

wanted from him. Your bacta is most helpful in re-growing what we have extracted. It was as if we had an unlimited supply of Jeedai samples at our disposal," The shaper was obviously taking great pleasure in Sannah's distress. He tapped his head tauntingly. *"I know all that he knows. He was quite adamant that despite the odds, you would come for him. I thank you for being the next volunteer. You are a Melodie, are you not? I know all about you from the Jeedai Sarkin-Tainer. Despite your physical weakness, I can shape you into an excellent addition to Shimrra's army."*
"Fat chance of that," Sannah held out her hand and her saber flew back into it. Her yellow eyes were stormy with rage as she clenched her jaw. "You'll regret hurting him."
"You are not a fighter, Fish Girl," the shaper mocked, his voice sounding exactly like Doran's. *"You might as well give up now before I kill both you and your soldier friend."*
"Almost two months," Sannah released a deep breath, trying to reign in her emotions. With great effort, she slid her saber back into her utility belt.
"*Almost two months?*"
"Almost two months since Doran last saw me," Sannah said. "People have changed in less time. Especially us Melodie."
The shaper reached into his robes and pulled out Doran's lightsaber. "*People change, but you couldn't possibly defeat me. I know all of the Jeedai's moves, and more. You do not stand a chance.*"
Sannah shook her head. "I'll give you one warning, surrender to me and I'll spare your life. I made it a point not to kill any living, sentient being."
"So the little Fish Girl won't kill me after all. Such a shame." The shaper lunged forward, Doran's lightsaber igniting with a deadly hiss. Sannah avoided the blade, and its glowing length split the table with all the samples in two. Beakers and vials shattered, living flasks emptied their contents as they hit the floor. Sannah continued to dodge the attacks, the lightsaber leaving burned streaks in the walls, floor, and ceiling of the cramped room.
"You cannot dodge forever."
"You're right," Sannah remarked, moving in when the shaper swung again. The action caught the shaper off-guard. With a wrist-lock and a blow to the shaper's elbow, Sannah spun away with Doran's lightsaber in her hands. "This isn't yours."
The deranged shaper snarled and pulled out an amphistaff. But before the weapon had even cleared his belt, Sannah had stepped in again, Doran's lightsaber flashing twice.

The shaper's arms fell to the ground. *"What?"*
"This little fish grew up," Sannah said coldly. "Do you still want to live?"
The shaper responded with a hate-filled gaze. Doran had learned many Force techniques in his travel, and the shaper was aware of all of them. Sannah felt the Force-based attack, felt the shaper try to burn her away with sheer hatred alone, and acted. Doran's saber flashed again, passing centimeters above the shaper's eyes. The shaper staggered backwards, gasping. He was now blind as well as maimed.
"*You'll die, Jeed...*"
There was a flurry of movement from the corner. Dinua suddenly leapt from her prone position, tackling the shaper. She drew her custom WESTAR blaster and shoved its barrel into the startled shaper's mouth. "*Hett o'r dar'yaim*, *hut'uun!*" Dinua hissed, a gauntleted hand around the shaper's neck.
There was a muffled whine and a flash of light as the yellow, superheated projectile erupted out of the top of the Vong's skull. The shaper slumped forward with a hole in the back of his head, very dead. Dinua spun her blaster around and placed it back into her holster. "Get Doran. We have seven minutes to get to the LZ."
Sannah nodded curtly and glanced back towards the narrow passageways leading out of the room. Letting the Force guide her, she darted down one of them and sliced open the membrane door of the cell.
"Doran!" Sannah felt bile rising in her throat at the sight of her childhood friend. Or what was left of him. He was still alive, but from the trauma inflicted on him, only just. She quickly ran to his side, placing a hand on a sweat-slickened and bloodied, cut up forehead. His heart was barely beating, his chest rising and falling in several second intervals, making an unhealthy rattling sound as it did.
Without the Force telling her otherwise, she would have thought he was dead. "Doran." Sannah whispered, anguish in her voice as she looked at the damage in horror. She was grateful that he was unconscious, not feeling any pain.
She used her saber to cut away the restraints holding his unconscious form, effortlessly bearing his weight. Dinua entered the room and promptly swore in Mando'a, her grip tightening around the handles of her heavy blaster. "You have him?"
Sannah gripped Doran protectively and nodded again.
"Then let's go," Dinua said, her jaw clenched, her teeth gritting audibly at the sight.

"Let's," Sannah breathed, willing her strength into Doran's tortured body and mind. *You'll be alright, Adventure Boy…you have to be. We still have at least five more years together, remember?*

=}IV{= =}IV{=

It was a running gun-battle from the Yuuzhan Vong base to the evac point. Waiting for the Mandalorians, freed slaves, freed Shamed Ones, and their other allies, were the *Kell Dragon, No Luck Required,* and the larger *Artorias' Requiem.* What pockets of warriors that did manage to organize themselves promptly took off in pursuit of the armored soldiers that had wreaked havoc on the base.

But the Mandalorians weren't done ruining their day yet.

"This is Dinua, we're clear of the blast zone. Detonate!"

What sounded like a deafening crack of thunder echoed through the mountain range. Great plumes of fire went up from the tops of two rocky peaks, like magma from a volcano. To anyone standing within the base, the explosion was probably the last thing they saw. An avalanche of boulders, snow, and other debris came crashing down as several hundred metric tons of mountain was brought down on the sizable Yuuzhan Vong base. The sound of all the rocks crashing down, splintering, shattering, clashing against one and other, was unforgettable. As was the fact that several tens of thousands of warriors and living creatures were also being caught under this rock fall.

The Mandalorians and their allies quickly boarded the escape crafts amidst a flurry of thud and razor bugs. The three vessels promptly burned jets and took off for space.

The easy part of leveling a stationary base had been accomplished. Now came the hard part of getting away.

"Sentinel," Dinua acknowledged Tyria as she slid into the co-pilot's seat. "Sannah's looking over Doran."

"He's a tough kid," Tyria replied, the tightening around her eyes the only sign of distress as she too tried to reinforce her son's strength. "He'll pull through."

"The question is, will we?" Dinua pointed to the Yuuzhan Vong fleet moving to cut them off.

Tyria flicked the switch of another detonator. The largest ship in the Yuuzhan Vong fleet, the swirl-like disc of a Worldship, suddenly found itself engulfed in a devastating fireball. The ship's arms were sent flying off and giant fissures appeared in the cracks of its hardened coral body.

"Now for the inside," Tyria muttered, depressing a button on the same detonator.

Like a tire with too much air, the Worldship blew apart in the blink of an eye. The internally placed explosives, planted at vital structures within the vessel, ripped through the ship and sent pieces of it flying. The nearby Yuuzhan Vong vessels scattered in a panic, and some were destroyed by the capital-ship sized pieces of debris that now filled the orbit of Bandomeer.

"That should…" Tyria trailed off when a second, smaller Yuuzhan Vong force suddenly arrived directly in their path. From the looks of it, the new arrivals appeared to be a convoy of warships coming to augment the forces already massed at the planet. Not that it did the Mandalorians any good.

Only seconds after this new group of ships reverted, the alien ships began firing on the three escaping vessels.

"Still five minutes until we're clear to hyperspace," Dinua noted.

"We'll be lucky if we last two," Tyria said. "*Requiem, Luck,* stick behind me. This ship can take more of a beating than you two."

"Ideas?" Dinua said, firing the *Dragon's* pitiful lasers in an act of defiance.

"Look on the bright side, Dinua. We completed all the mission objectives."

"That's only good if we manage to survive," Dinua retorted. "*Mand'alor* frowns on idiots who think dying for the mission is a heroic thing."

"Heads up, new contacts dropping out of hyperspace."

Dinua glanced at the sensor board. "Sensors reading an assortment of vessels, non-uniform, non-Vong. I'd say they were mercenaries. More friends of yours?"

"They're firing on the Vong, that's all I care about at the moment," Tyria said as the new arrivals drew away the attention of the approaching Yuuzhan Vong convoy. "We'll figure out who they are later."

The later wasn't much longer than a few seconds.

"I don't believe it," Dinua muttered under her breath as they passed by one of the mercenary ships. The Mando'a script and the giant crest it had emblazoned on the side was a clear indicator of their identity. "They're *Kyr'tsad*!"

Tyria fought back a smile in spite of everything. "Come to save the day. Boy are their egos going to be swollen."

"And the egos of the *Or'ramikade* will definitely be crushed," Dinua said, shaking her head in defeat. "To be saved by them…maybe it was better we died completing the mission."

"*Kyr'tsad* vessels, thanks for the assist," Tyria sent over the comm.

"*We knew that if we left things to the Or'ramikade, they'd screw things up,"* came the haughty voice of Verde Vizsla. "*Can't let the future of Mandalore rest solely in their hands."*
"I am so going to shoot her," Dinua muttered, exhaling as the *Kell Dragon* finally broke free of the Yuuzhan Vong convoy.
"Later," Tyria said consolingly. "Lady Vizsla, our ships our through, making the jump to hyperspace now."
The *Kyr'tsad*'s ragtag fleet broke off their attack and followed the rest of the Mandalorians out of Bandomeer's gravity well. *"Try to be more careful next time, Or'ramikade. We can't be around to save you all the time."*
"Okay, now she's just rubbing it in!" Dinua glared daggers at the comm-system.
As their ship leapt into hyperspace, Tyria leaned back in her chair and laughed. "I think the *Kyr'tsad* are in for some interesting times with Verde as their leader."
=}V{= =}V{=
The mission was a success. The Yuuzhan Vong war machine massing at Bandomeer had been dealt a serious blow, and more importantly, Doran had been rescued. But the solemn atmosphere within the *Kell Dragon* belayed what should have been a cause for celebration.
"How is he?" Dinua said tersely, unable to look away from Doran's bloodied form. In the dim lighting, she could even see the glistening white of bone sticking out between the layers of exposed muscle and flesh. How Doran was still alive was beyond her. Without her helmet protecting her, the emotions she was feeling shown clearly on her haunted face.
"Alive," Sannah shrugged helplessly. "Barely. He's in some sort of coma, or trance. I can't get through to him, even with our bond."
Dinua made a half-attempt to enter the room, but instead decided against it and remained standing in the doorway. "I've told Tyria to set course for Mandalore. The medical facilities there should be able to help him."
"Won't the Yuuzhan Vong follow us there?"
"The others will act as decoys to throw them off our scent. Doran is well known and liked among the *Or'ramikade* recruits." Dinua braced herself against the door frame, a hand curling into a fist. "Besides, they all owe him their lives anyway; and *Mando'ade* always repay our debts."
"Thank you," Sannah murmured, refocusing on her best friend. She ran her hand through his blood-matted hair, her eyes suspiciously wet even as she tried to maintain a strong face. "Come on, Doran. You're

really looking bad in front of Dinua right now. Can't you at least open your eyes? Just for a little bit? Please?"
Dinua averted her gaze, fighting back tears of her own. They were tears of rage. The damage to Doran's body was very indicative of what he had gone through. A lesser man would have already succumbed to the injuries and psychological trauma that Doran had gone through. Dinua doubted that many full-grown Mandalorian men would have been able to survive either. The skin of one of Doran's arms had been completely peeled off, and that was the least of his wounds. The rest of him barely resembled the young man Dinua had come to know and respect. It hurt her to think it, but he looked more like a bloodied corpse at the moment than a living being.
As an elite Mandalorian soldier, Dinua wasn't used to feeling helpless. Most of her problems could be solved by either shooting something or a good drink. But she had known Doran for a year, had been partnered with him through the training program set up for the Protectors. He had helped her move on from her mother's death, had been there to listen whenever she was angry and depressed. What had started out as feelings of animosity, towards what she saw as a weak and foolish Jedi child, had eventually evolved into friendship, into love. She loved him as a friend, held him responsible for getting her through one of the darkest chapters of her life. And she'd be damned if all she could do was just stand in a doorway while he lay comatose and at death's door. Not dead, merely marching far away.
She forced herself to look away from Doran's unresponsive form. Only the faint rise and fall of his chest continued to let Dinua know that there was some life in his body. She made her way back to the cockpit, her vision blurry as she combated emotions elite soldiers such as herself were trained to ignore. They were fighting a war, after all. It was natural that people would get hurt, would die. Eleven Mandalorians had fallen in the attack on the Worldship and Vong base, the families of five of them wouldn't even have bodies to bury. She had trained and lived with those eleven Mandalorians for nearly three years, yet their deaths did not seem to hurt her as she thought they would. But then again, they had had the honor of dying in battle, like a true Mandalorian, and their deaths had been swift. What had happened to Doran, she wouldn't wish on even her the worst of her enemies.
Almost robotically, she re-entered the cockpit of the small gunboat and fell back into the co-pilot's chair without a sound. She just bowed her head, trying to control her breathing, as she focused on happier times. On Doran's smiling features and not the carved-up remnant they were

now. If Tyria saw the tears streaming down the Mandalorian teen's cheek, the older woman didn't comment.
"You think you can take the helm?" Tyria said gently. "We'll be at Mandalore in another twenty minutes."
Dinua nodded faintly, sniffling and trying to wipe her tears away. She was surprised, when she suddenly found herself in Tyria's arms, sheltered from the cruelties of the outside world.
"[It's okay,]" Tyria murmured in Mando'a. "[It's okay to show emotion once in a while, brave daughter of Mandalore. Even the strongest of us can't remain strong all the time.]"
Dinua's eyes squeezed shut as tears began to flow faster than she could stop them, soaking the shoulder of Tyria's Jedi tunic. When her mother died, she had done her best not to cry. She had, after all, been in the presence of *Mand'alor* and his most trusted men, and she had been a little girl just shy of fifteen who had only recently passed her coming-of-age trials. There was no way she could have allowed herself to appear weak in front of them.
But now, in the reassuring presence of a woman she considered to be her second mother, Dinua felt no such restrictions. Tyria continued to rub Dinua's back soothingly, murmuring words of love and comfort. Dinua continued to cry softly, her arms moving up to hold onto the older woman in a desperate embrace. It had been three, nearly four years since her mother had died. And though she had been adopted by a man she now saw as her father, it was times like this when she really missed her mother. Thinking that only made her choking back a whimper as she clung to Tyria, trusting the older woman to protect her and shelter her until she was strong enough again to face the demands the galaxy placed on her.
"It's okay," Tyria said again. "Everything will all work out for the best, Dinua. I know it."
Dinua nodded. There was something about the way Tyria had said those words, so calm and full of confidence, that Dinua couldn't help but believe in them. As quickly as the storm broke, it passed, and Dinua very reluctantly extracted herself from the embrace.
"Thank you," Dinua said hoarsely, wiping the last of her tears away.
"You don't have to thank me for that, Dinua," Tyria smiled kindly. "You and Sannah helped me get my son back, it was the least I could do."
Dinua sniffled once. "Don't tell Doran or Sannah about this?"
"Of course," Tyria rubbed Dinua's arm comfortingly.
Dinua swallowed and suddenly felt ashamed of her breakdown, focusing instead on the blue vortex of hyperspace. Her eyes flicked

down to the navigational computer. "Hyperspace reversion in seven. If you would like to check on Doran, I have things under control here."
"Thank you," Tyria whispered.
Alone in the cockpit, Dinua let out another breath and let her emotional shields drop back into place. There would be time for emotions *after* she ensured that Doran got the best medical care on Mandalore.
=}VI{= =}VI{=
The *Kell Dragon* dropped out of hyperspace only moments later and was quickly directed towards a jungle in the northern hemisphere of the planet.
"Good, we're being sent to the Kyrimorut," Dinua breathed. "Jintar's clan is based out of there."
"The Skirata, right?" Tyria noted as their ship descended into Mandalore's atmosphere.
"Yes," Dinua said. "Jintar was an outcast at the training facility on Gargon because of who is father is. He and Doran bonded over their outcast status."
"I think Doran told me this when he was describing his stay with you folks. Jintar's father is Kom'rk Skirata, one of the Clone Troopers the head of Clan Skirata adopted. And the others at the academy thought it degrading that on offspring of a Clone Trooper would dare try and be an *Ori'ramikade*."
"Yes, Jintar was the top male in the training class," Dinua said with some amount of pride. "And the only one of that class to continue on and become an *Or'ramikade*."
"And you were the top female."
"Naturally," Dinua smirked.
The ship touched down just outside a very large, hut-like structure that appeared to be made of wood, vines, and mud. A large crowd of people was already waiting outside.
"And there are Clan Skirata's resident Jedi," Tyria said, spotting a trio of Force-sensitive beings. One was the red-haired woman that had helped to broker the peace between the *Kyr'tsad* and *Ori'ramikade*. The second Force-sensitive stood out quite noticeably due to her very long neck. And the third was a male in full Mandalorian armor, his lack of lightsaber and diminished Force presence a clear sign that, in some sense, he had 'gone native.' She had met all of them before when she had picked up Doran after his year among the Mandos, and had nothing but the deepest of respect and sympathy for them. They had, after all, survived times far harsher than any Jedi should have to experience.

Sannah emerged from the side room, pushing a hover-stretcher that contained Doran's deathly-still body. An oxygen mask had been placed over what was left of his mouth, and a blanket had been draped over him to hide the rest of the damage. The young Melodie Jedi looked grimly to Tyria and Dinua, her jaw set. "Let's go."
They passed through the ship's airlock and out onto the surface of Mandalore. An elderly man, who from the scars and worn callouses on his hands, had clearly been a soldier in his prime, moved forward to greet them.
"Welcome, Jedi. My grandson told me that you would need medical help."
"Yes, my son," Tyria breathed, motioning to the hover stretcher.
"Then you are fortunate," the elderly man said stiffly. "Kyrimorut has the best science and medical facilities on Mandalore."
"Do not worry, Tyria, we will take the utmost care for your son," the long-necked, Force-sensitive being said kindly.
"Thank you, Kina Ha," Tyria said solemnly.
"You have our word," the red-haired woman added. "Truth, honor, and vision."
"Please," Tyria acknowledged gratefully, motioning for Sannah to relinquish her white-knuckled grip on the handle of the stretcher. Sannah did so with extreme reluctance.
"I wish I could say our reunion had been under happier circumstances," Tyria said, her face drawn.
"As do we," Kina Ha agreed.
The red-haired woman eyed Sannah for a moment, then made a small motion with her hand. "Come. I can tell the bond between the two of you is strong. It will help him if you are near."
The Melodie Jedi bit her lower lip and nodded.
The older Mandalorian leader looked to Dinua and Tyria. "I have Boba Fett on the comm-line awaiting a debriefing on your mission."
"Go," Dinua pointed to Sannah and the others. "I've got this, Tyria. Be with your son."
=}VII{= =}VII{=
"So, you made it back."
Dinua stopped abusing the punching bag and whirled around to see a dark-skinned man in standard, Mandalorian civilian clothing. She bowed her head respectfully, ignoring the droplets of sweat the dripped from her spiky hair-do. "Kom'rk Skirata."
"My son remains among the living?"
"He does," Dinua rose. "*Mand'alor* just confirmed it."

"Not bad for your first, actual mission. Although, you're not acting as if you have just scored a great victory," the former Clone Trooper remarked, scanning the sparring weapons on the rack on the wall. He chose a pair of wooden staffs, hefting one over to Dinua. Despite the fact that he was a Clone Wars-era clone, he had utilized the cure created by scientists within Clan Skirata and had halted his rapid aging. Though temporally in his seventies, the tampering with his genetics had left him appearing to be a middle-age man, just past his prime, yet still in good physical condition. It would be a good decade or so before his body's physical age matched up with his chronological age. Which was a good thing for someone born and bred to be a soldier. "What's the problem, *Din'ika*?"
"Doran is badly hurt," Dinua said tersely, rotating the staff in her hands. "It's not a full victory until he recovers."
"I didn't know half-victories existed," Kom'rk said mildly. "You either win or lose. You *Or'ramikade* went out with objectives in mind. You completed those objectives. Lives were loss, people were injured, but it's war, soldier."
"I know full well what war is, Kom'rk," Dinua replied, lashing out with her staff. Kom'rk effortlessly batted aside her initial barrage. If Beviin had been her adoptive father, then Kom'rk was an adoptive uncle. Her friendship with Jintar had made her an ally with Clan Skirata and she had gotten to know the clan fairly well during the rare moments when she returned to visit Mandalore. "I've been training for it even before my mother died."
"That's good," Kom'rk remarked, spinning his own staff to force Dinua to break off the attack. "Then you won't be surprised if the Jedi doesn't survive then."
Dinua faltered, and Kom'rk moved in, knocking her staff out of her hands.
"Training for war is one thing, *Din'ika.* It is another thing entirely to live and fight in one." He returned her staff back to her. "You signed up to be a soldier. *Jatnese be te jatnese*. As you fight this war, your brothers and sisters will fall around you. Blaster bolts don't care who they fell. Be it that Jedi boy, Jintar, or whoever else, you have to be ready to accept it if they take that final march. For a soldier like yourself, despair and anger have no place on or off the battlefield. They make you brittle, and brittle soldiers are dead ones."
"I'm *not* angry," Dinua stressed, launching another flurry of strikes, the clack of wood echoing loud in the underground training chamber. "Or brittle. Or despairing in any way!"

Kom'rk fended off her attacks one blow after another. "My mistake, then. So, you just have a grudge against my training staff, is that it?"
"*Ne shab'rud'ni, haar'chak!"* Dinua spat in her native tongue. "I'm not in the mood."
"*Ogir'olar*. Not until you stop beating yourself up for a successful mission. Where I come from, you people just pulled off a miracle. How many other soldiers in this galaxy can say they went up against thousand to one odds and came out alive with the objectives completed?" Kom'rk's eyes narrowed. "But it's not the mission that's got you all hot and bothered, is it?"
Dinua let out a defiant yell as she brought her staff down so hard on Kom'rk's that her weapon broke down the middle. She staggered backwards, the two halves in her hands.
"*Mar'e*," Kom'rk breathed. "So it is really is that boy after all."
Breathing heavily, Dinua glared at Kom'rk, tears of frustration glimmering in her eyes. "*Copaani mirshmur'cye, Kom'rk?*"
Kom'rk discarded his training staff. "In the state you're in, you probably couldn't even land that blow."
Dinua opened up her attack with an elbow. Kom'rk blocked it, but Dinua knocked his arms down and swung her foot towards his head. He ducked under it and gave her a shove, over-balancing her and knocking her to the ground.
"Pressure may make gems, but too much pressure breaks them," Kom'rk said, paraphrasing a Mandalorian saying as he squatted down next to her. "So the *Jeti'ika* got himself captured and tortured, big deal. That was beyond your control. So was the time it took for you to get him back. If you did a rush job, more *Mando'ade* would have died. If you had gone any later, that boy would have died. You got there exactly when you needed to, led your men into battle, and were able to do more than just save him. I remember Doran from the last time he was here. He was being trained as a *Mando'ad* wasn't he? What do you think he'd say if he saw you in this sorry state?"
Dinua glared at Kom'rk, but didn't respond. She knew full well that Doran would be giving her the humor-filled version of the very same pep-talk she was now receiving.
"You may be one of the *Or'ramikade*, but even you can't do everything," Kom'rk said, his gaze softening. "And this war has already taken enough lives. You better not be one of them."
The Mandalorian teen exhaled low and slow, nodding in acknowledgement. Kom'rk held out his hand and helped her to her feet.
=}VIII{= =}VIII{=

Sannah continued to try to stabilize her breathing as she stared helplessly at the pair of doors only a few meters away. After the healers, Bardan, and Kina Ha, had taken Doran through those doors with the promise of making him better, the only thing she had been able to do since then was wring her hands and wait. Tyria had been waiting with her, but after the first hour, the older Jedi had left to get some much needed sleep. Sannah knew that she should be doing the same, but every time she closed her eyes, the only thing she saw was Doran's mangled and tortured body.

The double doors opened, and the red-haired woman emerged. She didn't seem surprised to see Sannah still waiting, despite the very late hour.

"He'll pull through," the woman said, taking a seat next to Sannah.

"He better," Sannah muttered softly, not willing to accept the alternative.

"I don't think I ever introduced myself before, even though we saw each other on Arda. My name's Tallisibeth Enwandung-Esterhazy, or 'Scout,' if that's easier for you."

"I'm Sannah."

Tallisibeth motioned back to the surgery room. "I guess the two of you have been through a lot?"

"That's an understatement," Sannah chuckled softly. "We're been best friends for a long time. Recently became boyfriend-girlfriend."

"Congratulations," Tallisibeth said with a kind smile. "Force-bonds as strong as yours and Doran's are rare and hard to make."

"We're been told that too," Sannah nodded. "He'll really be okay?"

"Physically, yes. The rest is nothing your Force-bond can't help fix," Tallisibeth replied honestly. She then skillfully switched topics. "Why don't you tell me about him? What's he like?"

Sannah closed her eyes, exhausted from the past day, but answered the older woman with a small smile nonetheless. She began to tell of the stories Doran would have whenever he arrived on Yavin IV with his mother. How he was one of the more powerful Jedi of their generation, yet never used that knowledge to look down on the others. About how he had made her feel less lonely at the Academy, made those times together fun. With him, the future always appeared to contain one adventure or another, but he lived in the moment and lightened up even the worst of situations with his presence. She told Tallisibeth of their latest adventures, how they went from best friend to something more. Of Yavin Eight, of Bakura, and of Raxis Prime. Just talking about it all made Sannah feel immensely better. As if knowing that the

history they had meant that Doran wasn't going to give up any time soon.
"He sounds amazing," Tallisibeth said, a smile on her own, slightly wrinkled face. "I once had a friend much like your Doran."
"Really?" Sannah breathed, she could feel the last of the adrenaline and tension leave her body, quickly replaced by a sense of lethargy. There was just something about the red-headed woman that made Sannah trust her.
"Yes," Tallisibeth shifted and allowed Sannah to rest her head on her lap. "He was a bit of a goof-ball too. Very strong in the Force. I learned a lot from him. I knew I could always trust him to make the right choices. Being able to see the future, he saw the big picture; while I saw and reacted to a tiny snap-shot in time. We were such a great team."
"'Were'?" Sannah looked up at the woman and saw a flash of sadness cross her green eyes.
"He didn't survive the Purge," Tallisibeth said softly. "But even then, I know that he's still with me in some way. We were good friends, and if we had the time, we might have been something more. Don't ever take the time you have with Doran for granted because you never know what will happen."
"I don't," Sannah nodded in understanding. "In five years, I turn into a fish and have to live out the rest of my life on my home world. He'd have to be completely crazy to stick around after that. He's crazy enough as it is being friends with me knowing that we really can't be anything more."
"Doesn't he know about your transformation? He has a choice to not be your friend, doesn't he?" Tallisibeth coached gently.
"Alright, he's already completely crazy," Sannah chuckled with a smile. The smile faded quickly though as more solemn thoughts came to her. "A part of me will wonder what will happen five years from now. Who will watch his back? What will become of us? He's so powerful in the Force, I don't want to be the reason why he becomes one of those planet-bound Jedi hermits that are in all the tales we're told as children."
"You can't live in the future, Sannah," Tallisibeth murmured. "You can plan for it, but living because you're scared that something might or might not happen isn't healthy. The future is always in motion, never set. Just trying to see it will drive you crazy. Believe me, it's better to have friends with whom you can share such a powerful Force bond with than go the rest of your life without one."

"You're right," Sannah closed her eyes. "I know. And I'm more than grateful Doran thinks that what we have is worth keeping. I don't know. I guess I'm a lot like Dinua was when she first met me. She was worried about who would have his back once their time together had passed. I guess, with all the dangers in this galaxy, I'm hoping his next partner can protect him too. Can…can love him like I do." She finished in a whisper, a tear escaping her closed lids. "In the meantime, I just hope to keep on building all those fun memories. Stories that I can tell again and again to the rest of my people. Let them know about the different, far-flung corners of the galaxy, what the Jedi, what Doran, and Tyria and everyone else is like. I want it so that when the time comes, when Doran and I part, we won't have any regrets. That all the time we've spent together will have meant something."
"All the more reason Bardan and the other healers are doing their best to give you that time," Tallisibeth said reassuringly. "Now get some sleep. I promise to wake you should anything happen."
Sannah yawned, nodded feebly, and was fast asleep within seconds.
=}IX{= =}IX{=
Boba Fett waited as the last of the Mandalorian leaders joined him, Lady Vizsla, and Tyria Sarkin-Tainer as holoprojections in the meeting room. Though the younger generation had the luxury of enjoying a brief respite, the war with the Yuuzhan Vong hadn't ended with the successful surprise attack on the fleet and base at Bandomeer.
"Time is something we do not have at the moment," Boba began, straight to the point. "Our pre-emptive attack has all but eliminated any possible shield of neutrality that Mandalore could have claimed. The Yuuzhan Vong *are* coming, and, like usual, Mandalore stands alone."
"We're anticipating casualties in the millions," reported Clan Skirata's representative in the Mandalorian government. Despite being a politician, the man wore full *beskar'gam*, albeit an extremely patchwork set. *"City-centers and major population nodes are already being evacuated and preparing for the worst."*
"Assume codes for your planetary defenses have been compromised," Verde Vizsla remarked. *"My people uncovered the culprit who leaked the plans for peace summit with the Or'ramikade to several mid-level government members on Manda'yaim. These same individuals also informed the Vongese that Clan Skirata is playing host to several Jedi. I'm sending Mand'alor the details now, he can take care of them as he sees fit."*

Boba glanced at the computer monitor and nodded to show that he had received the files. He tapped several more buttons. "They'll be dead in a little bit."
"If the Yuuzhan Vong know that Doran, Sannah, and myself are here, the Kyrimorut will be a primary target," Tyria began. *"They will attack not only because we are Jedi, but because we participated in the raid on Bandomeer."*
"Then will it not be better if you left now?" Another Mandalorian from the official government asked.
"The Vongese won't give a damn as to whether or not she's still there," Verde drawled. *"As far as they're concerned, Clan Skirata provided aid to the Jetii, so Clan Skirata needs to be dealt with as well."*
"Lady Vizsla is right," Tyria nodded. *"Whether we like it or not, and whether <u>you</u> like it or not, Sannah and I will be here to stay and help out when the Yuuzhan Vong arrive. You provided us shelter, so it is only honorable that we earn our keep."*
Several of the Mandalorians in the conference nodded their heads approvingly.
"The question still remains, what can Mandalore do to weather this storm?" Boba remarked. "We lack the ships, firepower, or manpower that the Yuuzhan Vong can bring to bear. We are cut off from the rest of the galaxy and are without their support. I think we're all in agreement, that at the very least, Mandalore will suffer from an intense planetary bombardment. At worse, the Vong will repeat what they did at Sernpidal and bring Concordia crashing down onto the planet."
"How would you recommend we use the Protectors, Mand'alor?" A third government official asked.
"Carefully," Boba replied sharply. "If we want to win this battle, we're going to have to outlast the Yuuzhan Vong. No matter how strong a planetary bombardment, they will have to put soldiers on the ground to completely win this planet over. *That* is when we will strike."
"My people will do the same on Manda'yaim's moons." Vizsla agreed. *"We will prevent the Yuuzhan Vong from using the moons as a battering ram."*
"I mean no offense, Lady Vizsla," a Mandalorian clan leader scoffed. "*But how many people do the Kyr'tsad have? And are you certain they can hold their own against an <u>actual</u> fighting force?"*
Vizsla raised a fine, blond eyebrow at the Mandalorian. "*You are more than welcome to have your clan assist us or take our place."*
There was a small silence as the Mandalorian shifted uncomfortably. *"I am certain Clan Vizsla will do an adequate job."*

"You are most generous in your praise. Now, if we can get back on topic. Mand'alor, you have laid out plans for our ground forces, but what of our space forces? Do you intend to hide them underground as well?"
"Unless we want the Yuuzhan Vong to suspect something and hold back, we will have to put up some resistance," Boba shook his head.
"There is an alternative," Tyria spoke up. *"A strategy I saw during my time as a Wraith. Your Gladiator fighters are already programmed to be slaved to the Pursuers for the hyperspace jumps. How hard would it be to slave their weapons and regular propulsion systems too?"*
"You want to automate our fighters?"
"*Some of them at least,*" Tyria nodded. *"Like you said, the Yuuzhan Vong expect some type of resistance. By having automated fighters, you can do that and keep your losses minimal."*
Boba glanced to the government representatives. "I'll arrange for the *Gladiators* in my possession to be upgraded for Jedi Sarkin-Tainer's plan. Ensure that the planetary-based fighters receive similar upgrades."
"Yes, Mand'alor." Two holograms flickered out.
"Until then, everyone else, continue your preparations. Mandalore will have the fight of its life on its hands and we're its only line of defense."
=}Chapter End{=
A\N: Hope this chapter was enjoyable for all. The conclusion of the Mando arc takes place chapters 50-51 of Book 3 of the Force Heretic Trilogy. Next chapter, the end of Book 2, will be up on Sunday. The Interlude will be up next Wednesday.

ADA 46

Forty-Six
=}I{= =}I{=
It was not unreasonable for the people trapped within the Perrinn sector to feel something of a siege-mentality at the moment. The surrounding sectors were under control of the Yuuzhan Vong, their backs were to the unruly regions of Wild Space, and what was left of five sector fleets looked far from the gleaming, stalwart image the Imperial Navy liked to project.
Though there were over two-dozen Star Destroyers and other vessels available, most of them from the Perrinn sector's still intact fleet, these ships were running low on provisions, ordnance, and raw material for repairs. The Perrinn sector wasn't one of the garrison sectors of the Empire and did not have the facilities to provide and sustain a large

standing fleet. The sector specialized in providing communication and repulsor-lift technologies to the rest of the Empire, which was ironically unhelpful at the moment given that the HoloNet beacons were down and that if a ship needed repulsor-lift tech to stay afloat, it was probably too far gone to salvage.
Of the four major systems within the sector, only Valc had any sort of planetary defense system and a population even remotely close to three billion. The Parshoone system contained only a remote listening post. The Brodo Asogi system contained most of the sector's tech factories, and was a major economic driving force within the sector. And the last system, the Cantras Gola, was filled with the headquarters of different business corporations, and book-ended the sector's economic capabilities. Unfortunately, credits were the last thing that the occupants of the Perrinn sector needed.
Morale was dangerously low. Cut off from Bastion and the rest of the Empire, no one knew what was happening. All they knew was that the Moff from the Clacis and Carrion were dead, their fleets in shambles, and that the citizens of those sectors were suffering the beginning stages of Yuuzhan Vong occupation; namely mass enslavement, vongforming of the planets, and other unspeakable atrocities. The news that Moff Flennic's Omega Blue had fallen into enemy hands and had opened the door for more severe retribution for the people of those planets hadn't helped any either.
The three surviving Moffs, Flennic, Crowal, and Rosset were not exactly on the friendliest terms. Moff Crowal didn't appreciate making her sector a refugee stronghold; which painted an even larger target on the territory under her domain. The resources being used to tend to the survivors from four other sectors had pushed the economy of the Perrinn sector to the breaking point.
Already, the occupants of the Brodo Asogi system within were staging massive protests, carrying effigies of the refugees in ships, pointing to the stars, and droning 'home' repeatedly. Several businesses on Cantras Gola had already collapsed under the strain, while multiple large groups of striking workers had to be corralled by stormtroopers when they transformed into angry mobs. Basic necessities such as food and shelter were already growing sparse from the influx of Imperial refugees, and the situation was growing more dire with every passing day.
Even isolated away from the daily rabble high up within the Star Destroyers, the strain could be felt. Stormtroopers and pilots who had been forced to abandon their home planets and sectors were finding themselves in a situation they were not used to. They had been

brought up with Imperial propaganda, had seen the Empire as a mighty bastion of power, where military strength and discipline led to a strong society. Losing four sectors in the same number of days had definitely deflated that image and left many of the soldiers lost and disillusioned. They still held out hope that they could retake the lost sectors, but as the days went by, that hope continued to decrease and frustration mounted. The chain of command was just barely keeping order and the chance of mutiny continued to rise.

In the midst of all this was the other two-thirds of the 'Save-the-Remnant' rescue force.

What was left of Kyp's Dozen had all been granted TIE Interceptors from a Star Destroyer that had fled the Carrion sector with less than half its crew. They were currently helping the Perrinn sector fleet patrol its borders and keeping a look out for any sign of the Yuuzhan Vong. And then there were the other Force sensitives of the group, along with Han, Shaeri, Jan Ors, and Booster Terrik, who were more or less on the same boat as the rest of the Imperials. Which wasn't a good place to be, no matter which government you served.

Wraith Squadron had teamed up with a local, anti-Imperial 'terrorist' group called the Red Moons. The Red Moons—led by a former New Republic colonel, Andrephan Stormcaller—had started out as an arm of New Republic Intelligence; with the specific purpose of inciting dissent within Imperial space to bring more Remnant planets over to the New Republic. As political winds changed, and the New Republic tried to establish less hostile relations with the Remnant, the group transformed into a mercenary organization with the same goal. Its two-dozen members found it more than amusing that, after nearly twenty years of sabotage and intrigue, they were now trying to actually stabilize the Empire.

The group of commandos, Intelligence experts, and Imperial dissidents had fit right alongside the rag-tag aura given off by the Wraiths. Both groups had their members scurrying back and forth trying to keep the Brodo Asogi and Cantras Gola systems as stable as possible, all the while venturing out into Yuuzhan Vong-held space to gain vital intelligence.

"If we launch an attack with the forces we have, we can retake Yaga Minor and our shipyards," Moff Flennic motioned to the holographic map of the Vong-occupied territories. "This will secure enough resources for our fleet."

"We would be passing through my sector," Moff Rosset argued, looking petulant at the thought that the others wouldn't spend time reclaiming his own territory first. "It would be more tactically sound if we retake

the Velcar sector first. If we do we will relieve a great deal of pressure from the Perrinn sector fleet. The vast majority of Moff Crowal's sector is adjacent to my own, and if we can secure my sector..."
"We'd be at risk of having our forces attacked from both the Clacis sector and my own," Moff Flennic objected, stabbing a finger at the holomap.
Lieutenant Pallin, the Imperial liaison officer for Jan, Kyle, and Jaden, spoke up. He had been on the ground at Ord Serda and seen firsthand how the Peace Brigade and Yuuzhan Vong slaving operations worked.
"If we have the well-being of the Imperial citizens in mind, we should be advancing on the Clacis sector through the Velcar. We need to cut off the major hyperspace routes in and out of the Empire both to stop any enemy reinforcements, but also to halt the slave ships that are exporting out citizens by the hour."
"Even if we do advance, there's no guarantee that we can hold those hyperspace routes. We have no idea how large the enemy forces are, or where they're concentrated. We'd be jumping blind and praying that the Vong aren't in the system waiting for us," Rosset argued.
"I for one will not grant either of you access to the Perrinn sector fleet," Moff Crowal said firmly, lips pressed thinly together in displeasure. "It is due to your own incompetence that you lost your sectors. I am not throwing away my ships to make up for your mistakes."
"And we're trying to save these people?" Ratnena Bora, Wraith Squadron member temporarily replacing Bhindi Drayson as the unit's slicer and tech-expert, rolled her eyes as she leaned back in her jury-rigged cot. Bottle of wine in one hand and a remote control in the other, she was among two people viewing the footage on the big monitor within the Red Moon's mobile command center.
Ratnena's fellow video watcher, and Red Moon's lead slicer and procurement specialist, was a talented pilot named Ivey; a tall, dark-haired woman who went by her call-sign, Peacekeeper. When asked why 'Peacekeeper,' when it was the job of the Red Moons to stir up trouble, she had replied that 'happy mercs were peaceful mercs', and that as the Red Moons' procurement specialist it was her job to get the stuff that kept the Red Moons happy and peaceful.
Ivey, seated on the dirty and oil-slicked floor that had seen better days, shrugged apathetically at Ratnena's comment. "It's still not too late to let 'em burn. Then we can have the Galactic Alliance, or whatever you call yourselves these days, come in rescue all those Imp civilians from the Vong. I doubt the systems we save will even think twice about staying with the Remnant if we do."

"Tempting," Ratnena said, flicking her waterspout of blonde hair as she drank from a bottle of wine nicked from a Moff's personal storeroom. "The boss-man and the Jedi would disapprove, though. The galaxy's gone to hell but we still have to be the good guys."
"Ever thought about going freelance?" Ivey stabbed a knife into a thin slice of meat and cheese. "You make heck of a lot more credits and you get to set your own rules. The way I hear it, it was either prison or the military for you. Not much left of the government, so I doubt anyone would care if you just left."
Ratnena sighed as she emptied the wine bottle. Despite the age difference of a couple decades, she and Ivey had found that they had a lot in common with each other. Something Ratnena wouldn't have thought possible until she had joined Wraith Squadron. "If you had given me that offer a year ago and I would have taken you up on it. Heck, even five months ago I might have taken it. The Wraiths, though, they're not all that bad. Don't tell Face, but I kind of like being with the rest of the squad."
"I know what you mean," Ivey reached into the nearby cooler and handed Ratnena another bottle of wine from the same source. "It's why I quit the Alliance in the first place. The colonel created one great group, kind of like a family. Didn't feel right once he left…so, I followed."
The door to the room opened and subjects of the conversation appeared, taking in the sight.
"Prankster," Face greeted, using Ratnena's call sign.
"Peacekeeper," Red Moons commander, Stormcaller inclined his head.
"Boss." Both women greeted with a dismissive wave of their hand.
"So bored that you had to slice into the surveillance systems in the Moffs' meeting chamber?" Face commented, watching the Moffs continue their argument.
"It was either that or watching that holodocumentary about the Sunrider family for the fifth time," Ratnena made a face. "Why anyone needs to know that Nomi Sunrider's great grandson was a writer named 'Mik,' I'll never know."
"After listening to the Moffs for the past half-hour, that sixth viewing is beginning to sound like a pretty good idea, though," Ivey chipped in. "The only thing the Moffs have decided on is that waiting for a Yuuzhan Vong attack is bad. They still haven't gotten past that though."
"The Yuuzhan Vong are making a move that will probably render their arguments moot," Stormcaller said grimly.
Both women turned their full attention to their leaders.
"Sir?" Ivey tilted her head.

"The Peace Brigade and Vong have liberated the prison system of Ryloon," Stormcaller said, his cigar-worn voice sounding as gruff as usual. "Monitoring the ship movements, Sully, and the Wraith's Elassar and Hul, have tracked the vessels into the Churruma system. They've reported a massing of Peace Brigade and Yuuzhan Vong vessels in that system. According to them, something big is going down, and we're going to have to do something about it."
"The Churruma system is used by the Imps for mining," Ivey frowned. "It's not militarily important at all. Nor is it connected to the major hyperspace routes. "
"Is this another one of 'Hul's Hunches'?" Ratnena spoke up, mentioning the other new member of Wraith Squadron, the one replacing Baljos Arnjak as resident bio-technology expert.
Hul Qat was an excellent tracker and, being Yuuzhan Vong himself, was also very familiar with Yuuzhan Vong biots. A Shamed One who had once been a part of Domain Qat's warrior caste, Hul was a quick study and still maintained very keen instincts despite his years in the lowest of the castes. He had declared himself free shortly after the battle of Obroa-Skai and defected to the then New Republic. Though he had at first been met with skepticism, he had gone on to prove himself to the members of Wraith Squadron and had earned the trust of his squadmates. His ability to analyze Yuuzhan Vong movements and deduce what their commanders had planned had enabled Wraith Squadron to avoid trouble on more than one occasion; giving rise to the phrase 'Hul's Hunches' whenever he was seeing something no one else was.
"It was at first," Face nodded. "But then Elassar and Sully learned that a Yuuzhan Vong sub-commander, one Torkal Vorrik, and his people had personally joined this gathering. We estimate that Torkal has a third of the Yuuzhan Vong forces in Remnant space under his command, so something big is definitely going down."
"Alright, alright," Ratnena tapped a few buttons on the console to record the meeting. "Briefing room?"
"Briefing room," Face confirmed.
The four made their way over to the 'briefing room' on the *Red Moon Revenge*, which doubled as the lounge in non-duty times. Waiting for them was the rest of Wraith Squadron, the command staff of the Red Moons, and three Jedi apprentices—whom Booster had sent over to the Intelligence unit against the better judgment of the senior Jedi, as a way for the apprentices to gain 'life-experience.'
Valin Horn, Bazel Warv, and Seff Hellin were decidedly out of place in a room full of seasoned veterans and people who did sneaky things for a

living. At the same time, however, they were learning all about the art of improvisation, under-the-table dealing, not-so-legal methods for acquiring goods, and all the stuff a good Jedi wouldn't learn while meditating and lifting rocks.
"This is it, people," Stormcaller called out, sticking a fresh cigar in his mouth. "We have information that the Vong are making a final push for the Perrinn sector. As it is the Moffs there don't know the different between their rears from a hole in the ground, so we have to do what must be done to save them. We fail, we die. We die, not only would that make your retirement benefits moot, the Perrinn sector, and all the good people in it, also die."
"For those of you old enough to remember the way we took down Warlord Zsinj's shiny new Super Star Destroyer, we'll be going with a similar strategy," Face said. "Those of you born after that, quit reminding me of just how old I am. What most of us will be doing is joining the Peace Brigade forces and getting into a position to cause some major damage to the Yuuzhan Vong fleet. We've brought along several of our tricks that we created back on Borleias and upgraded them to make them more efficient. When the Vong fleet jump into the Perrinn sector, we'll initiate phase two of our plan"
"Each of your fighters will be equipped with these special packages," Stormcaller resumed. He motioned to an array of devices spread out on a table. "Gravimetric-alteration pitons, when fired into a Vong ship, will confuse the yammosk and cause fellow Vong ships to fire on it. Decoy-torpedoes; calibrated to your fighter's specific gravimetric signature. You fire one, the Vong chase it, they blow up. Simple. And lastly, for the bigger vessels, fuel-free torpedoes, similar to the Jedi Shadow Bomb. These torpedoes don't use fuel propellant, but instead emit bursts of air to move them along. Not as fast as the propellant-based torps, but they won't be visible to the Vong shielding crews."
"When we join up with the Peace Brigade forces, we will be assigning targets, primary and secondary. When we emerge in the Perrinn system, should you be in the vicinity of either target, these priority targets will be of the utmost importance. Those of us not infiltrating the Vong will be returning with us back to the Imperials so that they don't vape our people before the plan is put into effect."
"So what are we doing?" Valin spoke up.
"I'm glad you asked," Face said with a humorless smile. "You, Seff, and Barv will be with the infiltration unit. Since HoloNet channels between sectors are down, we need a way to communication with the strike team should anything go wrong. As Jedi, I'm well aware that you can use the Force to communicate with Skywalker and the others. I won't

lie and say that the mission isn't dangerous. It is, very much. You'll be following Ratnena's lead on this one and remaining as inconspicuous as possible."
"Sir?" Ratnena blinked in surprise.
Face winked at her. "I am going to have to use my considerable charm and acting ability to convince the Peace Brigade that we're a bunch of Yuuzhan Vong worshipping, Jedi-hating, power-hungry, greed-blinded, fanatics. That will strain my brainpower and I need someone with street-smarts watching over our only link to our allies."
"Yes, sir," Ratnena drawled. She pointed a finger at the three younger Jedi. At twenty-three, she was only six years older than Seff. "Listen up, you die on my watch, you'll be in so much trouble you'll wish you've never been born."
"Understood, Flight Officer," Valin acknowledged.
"As long as we're clear," Ratnena sat back down.
"Of the Red Moons, about half of you will join Face's group under his command," Stormcaller said, passing out datapads with their assignments on them. "I'll be rejoining the Imperials and commanding the other half, as well as any spare Wraiths Face leaves lying about. This is what we have been preparing for people. When the dust settles, the Perrinn sector *will* still be standing. I won't accept any other outcome. Do you get me, Red Moons?"
"Sir, yes sir!" The Red Moons in the room replied.
The Wraiths looked to Face, who just shrugged and motioned to Stormcaller. "What he said."
"No motivational speech?" Kell Tainer said innocently. "No moving monologue about how proud you are to have come so far with us? Or a lecture appealing to our sense of honor and desire to protect?"
"Tainer."
"Sir?"
"You're doing this mission without any of your explosives."
"I withdraw my comment, sir," Kell gulped comically.
Face affected a pensive look. "*Maybe* I'll give you a single thermal detonator to take with you."
"I'll worship the ground you walk on and will never mock your oratory skills again."
"I guess I'll let you off with a warning this time."
"Thank you, sir."
Face kept his face impassive, even though he could see that the exchange had drained some of the tension in the room. "You heard Colonel Stormcaller. We die, bad things happen. We live, bad things get averted. Right now, we need all the allies we can get to put an end

to this war. The Imperials will be a nice addition to what has already been accomplished. Now, let's get out there and do the impossible."

=}II{= =}II{=

"What is this place?" Jaina whispered, staring out at the massive room in disbelief.

"A Shaping damutek at its finest," Wryadra murmured, though for once, his voice reflected a similar surprise.

Jaina, the Chiss, and Freed Ones, had emerged out from the stairs that led to the underground slave pens to find themselves in a room large enough to fit an entire cruiser in. Rib-like catwalks stretched back and forth above them, leading to different organic platforms. This crisscross pattern seemed to go on until the very top of the building, the spire, which was so far above them they couldn't even make it out. There were no windows or apparent doors. The entire damutek appeared to be one giant room.

In one corner there was a row of cell-like compartments. In another, testing apparatuses of various sorts bubbled, hummed, and fizzled. Shapers were hard at work, hastily moving from one side of the room to another, monitoring various devices, or checking the samples. There had to be hundreds of shapers, nearly a thousand even. Yet none of them appeared to be enjoying what they were doing, the atmosphere in the damutek more than oppressive and tinged with a definite fear. Fortunately for Jaina and the others, despite all the numbers, the area that they had emerged from was fairly sheltered, with organic partitions temporarily shielding them from view.

"All of Domain Rin is here," Wryadra said, his voice sounding hoarse as his eyes darted about the room. He seemed both pale and uncertain, so unlike the Wryadra Jaina had come to know over the past year.

"That's just great, how are we supposed to sneak by hundreds of shapers?"

Wryadra took in a breath, glanced at Jaina, and shook his head very slowly. "We don't."

"Wryadra?"

Before anyone could stop him, the shaper emerged from the enclosed area above the stairwell and out into the main chamber.

"[Domain Rin, I demand your attention!]" Wryadra called out in his native tongue. His voice was much harsher, and lacked the melodic nature it had when he spoke in Basic.

A sudden silence followed his proclamation as a multitude of eyes turned towards Wryadra. The shaper continued towards the center of the room without any fear, the others quickly averting wide eyes when they realized who he was.

A hoarse cackling rang out from one of the shapers, and the rest appeared to part as a single shaper approached Wryadra. The shaper was in his prime, large, with various implants writhing and twisting about from his body. He clasped two gnarled and clawed hands together in amusement and leered, exposing artificially sharpened teeth.
"[So, you have returned, Wry'adra Rin. How amusing that you are still alive. Have you enjoyed the life of a Shamed One?]"
"[It is an interesting experience, brother,]" Wryadra said evenly. "[And I have you to thank for that. If you had not agreed to help Domain Zun-Quin expel me and sabotage their own Worldship, I would have never had my eyes open to the lies we all worship.]"
Jaina and the others, who were being provided a word-for-word translation by Falhar, stared at Wryadra in surprise.
"[So you have joined the ranks of the heretics then? How amusing considering you were once the Master Shaper of our Domain. Oh, I meant, *my* Domain.]"
"[Was gaining my position worth disgracing Domain Rin, *Master Shaper* Kar'al?]" Wryadra said, his voice cool despite his brother's taunts.
"[Was submitting to Zun-Quin, groveling at Razil Zun-Quin's feet, worth the price our people paid? Half our Domain sacrificed to the gods for the death of the Worldship; our own parents among them. You convinced Shimrra to keep me alive as a Shamed so I could witness your rise in my place. I look around in this damutek and see only fear and shame where there was once pride and purpose.]"
"Spare me, older brother," Kar'al spat out in Basic. "We lost our pride and purpose long ago when we let Zun-Quin surpass us in the last gathering of the Shaping Domains. It was Domain Rin that had once been the dominant one! Dominant until *you* led is down a path of decay! What did we have after that gathering? Status? Respect? Power? No!"
"We had scruples," Wryadra hissed, anger filling his words. "We were known as the Domain-That-Brings-Life, the Chosen of Yun-Ne'Shel! We were the personal shapers of Supreme Overlord Quoreal. He knew that the future of our race was not in death, but in life! It did not matter if Domain Rin became relegated to obscurity. So long as we did not let our greed for power and knowledge compromise who we were, I was willing to accept whatever punishment Shimrra dealt to our Domain."
"*You* were willing," Kar'al snarled. "What of the rest of the Domain you led? Your Quorealist's sympathies nearly doomed our entire Domain to centuries of disgrace. Quoreal died nearly half a century ago and yet

you still clung to his weak way of thinking! Domain Rin needed to move on, change with the times!"
"I see," Wryadra said, his voice like ice. "Then I regret that I have to do this, brother. But we must both pay for our transgressions before our Domain completely falls into ruin. You for leading Domain Rin down this path, and me for not having the strength or foresight to stop you earlier."
"Do what? What can *you* do, Shamed One?"
Wryadra produced a small cloth pouch. "I will see to it that you embrace your research to its fullest extent."
"An infidel carrying case?" Kar'al scoffed, several steps away. "And from the looks of it, empty."
"Not empty," Wryadra shook his head and pulled on a glove. Carefully, slowly, he tilted the pouch and a fine collection of powder poured out onto his covered hand. "I may have stripped Domain Rin of any chance of honor, but this, is what you have led our Domain to. And this is how we shall end. We shall both die for our short sightedness."
Wryadra blew the fine powder over Kar'al. As Kar'al coughed and tried to wave away the cloud of fine particles, Wryadra removed his glove and very calmly stepped forward to embrace his brother. "[We die now in hopes that the next leader of Domain Rin will not be as arrogant and foolish as we.]"
"[What…what have you done?]" Kar'al was gasping for air now as blisters broke out on his skin.
"[The powder contained the spores of the ship the Matalok shot down,]" Wryadra answered, black legions appearing on his face as he continued to hold his brother and breathe deep, long breaths. "[I managed to keep the virus alive by feeding it fresh pieces of yorik coral.]"
"[You fool,]" Kar'al wheezed, a hand flailing and brushing against a nearby table. The organic table likewise began to blacken and dissolve. "[We…we…we could have been gods…Shaping…Shaping anything we desired. Just like what we talked about as children. I just wanted to restore our place in the eyes of the Supreme Overlord…]"
"[Some things just aren't worth the price, little brother,]" Wryadra whispered, blood beginning to trickle out of his nose and ears. "[Better we die like this than compound our errors any further.]"
Jaina and the others could only watch in horror at the unexpected turn of events. Both brothers sank to their knees, their very flesh peeling off; their bones snapping under the weight of their bodies. Within another minute, Wryadra and his brother laid still and dead in the center of the Shaping damutek, and utter silence reigned. The other

shapers gave the two bodies a wide berth as the virus continued to eat away at the tissue.
"Falhar," Jaina managed shakily.
"I did not know Wryadra was of Domain Rin," the former warrior shook his head, seemingly just as shocked as she was.
Jaina emerged from the small enclosure, and the stunned shapers all gasped at the sight of her. Without any leaders, however, the shapers didn't quite seem to know what to do.
Falhar saw this and immediately took advantage of it. He strode forward and addressed the crowd. "[Hail Jaina Solo, the living incarnation of the goddess, Yun-Harla! Yun-Harla the Trickster, Yun-Harla the Cloaked One, the Cloaked Goddess of deceit! Twin sister of Jacen Solo, incarnation of Yun-Yammka. Sister to Anakin Solo, incarnation of Yun-Ne'Shel.]" He proclaimed in a loud, ringing voice. "[She has heard your secret prayers and delivered you from the false leader who dared use her arts to take over Domain Rin and lead it away from the teachings of Yun-Ne'Shel. She will be merciful, you need only kneel in submission and let us pass.]"
Jaina, who only recognized the names of her brothers and the gods, quickly caught on to what Falhar was doing and played along. She motioned to the other Yuuzhan Vong members of their group and they formed up behind her. Together, they then regally proceeded between the rows of tables and stopped at the center of the room. Surrounding them, on bent knees, was the entirety of Domain Rin. "Falhar. Demand that the next leaders of Domain Rin approach me."
Four Yuuzhan Vong quickly appeared before her, and dropped to one knee in supplication, their cries in Basic quickly babbling forth.
"Spare us, Yun-Harla."
"We ask for your mercy."
"Had we not followed Kar'al we too would have been sacrificed."
The fourth shaper, a younger looking female, said nothing and kept her eyes rooted to the floor.
"Tell me your name," Jaina demanded, trying to sound as calm as possible despite the fact that she had literally seen Wryadra melt before her eyes.
"I am Ne'rai Rin, Cloaked One."
"Ne'rai. As your Goddess and as a Jedi, you are well aware that I can sense any deception?"
"Yes, Goddess," Ne'rai kept her eyes averted.
"Can you think of any reason why I should spare the four of you for not speaking out and stopping Kar'al the Deceiver?"

"Goddess!" One of three other shapers cried out. "Please, do not punish us for any words that come from that one's mouth. She is only…"
"Silence, fool," Falhar barked, upon a brief nod from Jaina. "The Goddess is not speaking to you."
The shaper fell silent with a whimper.
Ne'rai looked up and held Jaina's gaze. "I do not have any reason for you, Yun-Harla. It is as you said. As leaders of our Domain, we should have spoken out and stopped Kar'al from perverting our craft. Our lives are yours to take as you see fit.
"You offer no defense?"
"I do not." Ne'rai bowed her head again.
"Very well then, Master Shaper. So long as you learn from this event and it does not repeat itself, I am satisfied."
Ne'rai looked up in alarm. "Goddess…I am merely an adept…I do not…."
"One need not know all the Shaping knowledge to be a Master Shaper," Jaina said calmly, lowering herself to meet the other young woman's eyes. "One is never done learning after all. Honesty, wisdom, the ability to see and admit when one is wrong, are things far more important. Domain Rin has been without a leader capable of those traits for too long. You will help to change this Domain for the better as its next leader."
Ne'rai's mouth dropped open in shock, before she bowed her head. "I thank you, *Jeedai* Solo."
The other three shapers seemed incredulous at what was unfolding. Jaina rose and promptly pinned the three of them with a dark glare. "This is your one and only warning. You will assist Master Shaper Ne'rai Rin in the rebuilding of your Domain or I will return and make inflict on you a fate far worse than that of Kar'al and Wryadra. Kar'al the Usurper was right about one thing, though. Times are changing. The Yuuzhan Vong cannot continue this cycle of death and hope to survive. Already millions of brave warriors have lost their lives for a foolish endeavor. If you truly serve the Yuuzhan Vong then you will abandon your works of death and refocus on life. Any shaper with the wisdom of Ne'rai can see the logic in this."
As the last echoes of Falhar's translation died off, the shapers all bowed their heads once more in respect.
"Goddess, there is something you must know," Ne'rai whispered.
"Yes?"
"Before you arrived, a project demanded of Domain Rin was completed and given to B'Shith Vorrik."

"Project?"
"Yes, Goddess. It was inspired by the Imperial weapon that fell into our hands, as well as previous research that was in the databanks of this planet. Something called the Krytos virus."
Jaina felt a pit begin to form in her stomach. "Yes?"
"It is a virus-based weapon that has multiple methods of delivery and is effective inhaled or in contact with the flesh. When unleashed, the virus will target humans only. Because your species controls much of this galaxies' power, it was thought that such a virus would help turn the tide back in favor of the Yuuzhan Vong."
Jaina fought back several choice words. "Thank you for your honesty."
"My father would not have wanted any more deaths to be attributed to this Domain," Ne'rai responded.
"Your father?"
"He was among those killed as punishment for the death of the Zun-Quin Worldship."
"I am sorry for your loss."
"Do not be. He died believing that Domain Rin would one day be great again, and thanks to you, he will not be mistaken."
"Goddess." Falhar spoke up.
Jaina glanced at the warrior questioningly. "Falhar?"
"Domain Rin is entirely a Shaping Domain. Even if we were to rid the Remnant of Domain Vorrik, they will still be vulnerable."
Jaina saw the way Falhar was glancing at Ne'rai and smiled kindly. "Then I will order you, and any of the other warriors who wish to remain, to stay and safeguard this Domain. The Yuuzhan Vong will have much need of their skills once this war is over."
"Thank you, Goddess," Falhar inclined his head.
Jaina looked back to the new head of Domain Rin. "Do you have a ship with which the rest of us can leave this planet? We need to warn the others of this new virus."
"No," Ne'rai shook her head. "But if we call the ships in orbit and alert them of your presence, their captains will land with the hope of gaining the honor of making you their prisoner. If the reports we heard were true, and you destroyed the Matalok guarding this facility, the smaller vessels will have at most several dozen warriors each. With sufficient planning, you should be able to dispatch them."
Jaina blinked. "You're okay with us killing Yuuzhan Vong?"
"They are Domain Vorrik, we are Domain Rin," Ne'rai replied with an apathetic shrug. "They are about as interested in our Shaping as we are in their warrioring and priestly business. Different domain, different deity, different purpose. They are pawns of Shimrra, nothing more.

Sometimes cancerous tissue must be removed before the patient can heal."
From the aghast expressions on the older shapers kneeling beside her, Jaina had the distinct impression Ne'rai's very unique outlook contrasted greatly with their own. "Won't the rest of Domain Vorrik retaliate when they've learned that you led these others into a trap?"
"If you return to the Remnant and secure B'Shith's defeat, Domain Vorrik will be the least of our worries," Ne'rai said. "In any case, once the Remnant regains control of their territory, we shall negotiate with them for permission to remain on this planet. Perhaps Shape it so that life can grow on its surface once more. We shall be well protected by their ships so do not worry about us."
Once again, the other older shapers looked almost comical as they stared at Ne'rai with horrified, wide-eyed expressions. Their hands were balled in tight fists and all of their implants were shifting as their agitation disrupted the symbiotic creatures embedded in their bodies. Jaina didn't need any sort of Vongsense to read what was about to happen. Apparently, neither did Ne'rai.
No sooner had one of the shapers sprung to his feet and lunged at her, then one of Ne'rai's fingers flicked up and a finger-spear lanced out directly through the charging shaper's head. Ne'rai flicked her wrist, and cleanly sliced the top of the shaper's head right off. The older shaper collapsed where he was, an expression of sheer shock on his features.
Jaina eyeballed the other two shapers kneeling before her, and they swiftly looked at the ground in terror.
"Are you going to be alright with these two?" Jaina jerked her thumb at them.
Ne'rai inclined her head slightly. "I will be."
"Good. Then give us a few minutes to prepare for Domain Vorrik's warriors, then make the call to their ships."
"As you command, Cloaked Goddess."
=}III{= =}III{=
Wearing light prosthetics to age his face, and dressed in the uniform of an Imperial lieutenant, Valin Horn listened to the motivational speeches with great amusement. Apparently Face was very fluent in insane madman, egomaniac, fawning acolyte, and delusional, power hungry, warlord. Face, and self-proclaimed Peace Brigade Director Tarneel, were practically clones of each other as they gesticulated and raved about how they were all at the cusp of great glory, power, and riches beyond imagination.

Face had become Tarneel's new best friend ever since arriving on the *Victory*-class Star Destroyer, the *Crusader*. On loan from Moff Flennic after it had taken heavy battle damage at Yaga Minor, the *Crusader* was an outdated Star Destroyer that had been due to be decommissioned before the Yuuzhan Vong had attacked. Most of the crew had been killed when the Domain Vorrik warships had opened fire, and those left had stayed on to lend some credibility to Face's story—that of the charismatic 'General Kargin,' who had managed to convince his entire crew to defect to the Yuuzhan Vong side of the war. In addition to Sharr Latt, Kell Tainer, and Ratnena Bora from Wraith Squadron, and the dozen or so Red Moon mercs, Face had nearly a thousand of the *Crusader*'s crew at his disposal.

Whether that was good or bad remained to be seen.

It went without saying that the Star Destroyer was a far cry above whatever the Peace Brigade had managed to field and Tarneel had transferred his flag within minutes of meeting Face. The loss of Hutt Space had decimated the ranks of the Peace Brigade and had left them with little to go by. And, with the biggest ship the Peace Brigade had managed to field being Tarneel's previous flag, an even older CC-9600 Corelliean frigate, a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer was happily welcomed.

Which was way the *Crusader*'s hangar was now filled with Peace Brigaders, Yuuzhan Vong shocktroopers, and the ship's original stormtrooper regiment, all gathered to listen to the pre-battle speech. There were also nearly a thousand prisoners, freshly liberated from Imperial prisons in the Ryloon system, in attendance, eager for their own brand of revenge.

"And from the ashes of the Empire, the Peace Brigade shall be reborn!" Tarneel crowed into the voice-amplifier. Valin had to admit that the man had a certain charismatic air to him. He would have to be charismatic to hold together the band of disillusioned smugglers, pirates, and bounty-hunters that now made up the Peace Brigade force. "We shall make our new home on Bastion! On Valc! On Yaga Minor itself! We shall create a new Peace Brigade Empire to bring peace to this galaxy, and we shall be rewarded for all the sweat and blood we have shed thus far! Our great Yuuzhan Vong allies continue to have faith in us, and we will not let them down. Once we take the Perrinn sector, we will have effectively cut the old Empire in two!"

Face stepped forward, holding out his arms as if he could embrace them all. "The Empire has been dead for a long time. Those in charge just haven't realized it yet. It is time we stepped up and opened their eyes. A new era is dawning. An era that all of you will have a chance to

take part in because you've chosen the winning side. And I, General Kargin, promise all of you a place beneath Director Tarneel and I as we lead you into this bright new future. We have much to thank the Yuuzhan Vong for. And our enemies have good reason to fear them. As we act as the spearhead for Domain Vorrik, we shall drive hard and deep into our enemy. We will bathe in their blood and drink from their skulls. And we will show this galaxy what happens to all who oppose our noble ideals! Director Tarneel, if you will be so kind as to give the muster order?"

Director Tarneel stepped forward, smoothing his short-trimmed beard as he did. "Gentlemen and women, members of Domain Vorrik. Report to your ready stations and prepare to do battle!"

As per General Kargin's recommendation, elements of the *Crusader*'s stormtrooper corps would be mixing with the Peace Brigade and Yuuzhan Vong crew to 'help ease and facilitate communications' between the forces. Valin and Ratnena had the misfortune, or luck—depending on one's point of view—to accompany a unit of stormtroopers onto the Yuuzhan Vong command-ship itself. Though Torkal Vorrik had initially been suspicious of the defection of an entire Star Destroyer, Face had put on the act of a lifetime—showing a disturbing willingness to sacrifice most of his crew, and other such grandiose gestures of faith—and convinced the Yuuzhan Vong sub-commander that they were all indeed fanatical loyalists to the cause.

Valin nodded once to Barv and Seff as they went off to their own assignments, and fell in line with the rest of his assigned unit. He quickly saw Ratnena, wearing heavy prosthetics and wearing the uniform of an Imperial officer. She was standing next to the stormtrooper in charge of the sixteen strong Red Moon-disguised-as-stormtrooper unit.

Remembering Ratnena's alias, one Colonel Sara Sandblaster, he stepped forward and gave them the sharpest salute he could muster. "Colonels Sandblaster, TC-1289, Lieutenant Strings reporting for duty."

"At ease, Lieutenant," Ratnena acknowledged.

"Lieutenant," TC-1289, echoed with a tilt of his head. As one of the clones created for the Empire's army, the stormtrooper colonel appeared to feel nothing but mindless loyalty towards the empire he served. Yet, Valin couldn't help shake the feeling that the man was something more.

"Your people are all present now?" A heavily scarred Yuuzhan Vong warrior, with a small divot in his forehead, growled.

"We are," Ratnena said curtly, sounding every bit like an Imperial forced to work with a non-human.

Valin kept his face as impassive as possible as they followed the Yuuzhan Vong warrior to a shuttle-like living ship docked within the *Crusader*'s landing bay. Other warriors joined their little group and they boarded the alien vessel. It was one experience interacting with Yuuzhan Vong and feeling their absence in the Force, it was quite another to be inside a Yuuzhan Vong vessel completely surrounded by scowling, grumpy, Yuuzhan Vong warriors.

The shuttle took the short journey from the *Crusader* and to the Yuuzhan Vong command-ship, the *Drainer of Heart's Blood.* It was a massive Matalok, sleek, with thick, organic, black armored plates, and bristling with plasma cannons and docked coralskippers. Not that they could see it from the inside of the Yuuzhan Vong shuttle. Only the pilot, with the cognition hood, could perceive anything outside of the ship's living walls.

The only thing they could see and feel was the dark, humid, compartment they were clustered in. The vessel's walls expanded and contracted with every breath it took. The knowledge that they were quite possibly standing inside this living transport's stomach was not a comforting one. Even Ratnena was having a hard time keeping her composure as the seconds ticked by.

Fortunately, the trip did not take long, and before long, they were stepping out of the shuttle and onto the deck of the larger, very alien, cruiser.

And Valin went from being surrounded by a handful of Yuuzhan Vong to being surrounded by thousands. This time he couldn't stop himself from shuddering. Past the walls of the ship, he could feel the rest of the galaxy with the Force. But inside the very much alive vessel, he couldn't sense anything. It was like living in a void. And it was more than unnerving. He had learned his lesson from interacting Sah Vorrik and the others on Yaga Minor. Everyone around him was the enemy. Wanted to do harm to another. As a Jedi, he couldn't allow it.

"Welcome, Colonel…Sandblaster."

Valin stiffened at the familiar voice of Sub-Commander Torkal. He quickly schooled his features into an impassive mask, despite the fury that crept up. It was Torkal's fault that Sah and his crèchemates had been forced to fight and die in a pointless battle. Torkal, who had used Sah and the others as tools, pawns to further a goal. At that moment, Valin felt what it was like to truly despise someone.

"Thank you, Sub-Commander," Ratnena said smoothly. "Let us give thanks to your gods once we obtain the victory they have granted us."

"Choose two of your subordinates to accompany you to the bridge." Torkal ignored Ratnena's words. "The rest shall remain here. Fifteen people aren't needed to coordinate ship movements after all."
"Of course. This is your ship," Ratnena agreed. She glanced towards Valin and the stormtrooper colonel. "Colonel TC-1289, Lieutenant Strings, the two of you will follow me and Sub-Commander Torkal."
Valin fell back on all of his Jedi training as he tried to calm his rapidly beating heart and mentally recite the plan that Wraith Squadron and the Red Moons had concocted. In the half-hour they had while they were in hyperspace, it was up to Ratnena, he, and the rest of the stormtroopers to seize control of the vessel. On the Imperial side of things, Danni and the yammosk jammers she had installed on several of the defending Star Destroyers would activate upon their arrival. With their command-ship in the dark and the yammosk scrambled, the rest of the Yuuzhan Vong force should then fall into the unorganized mess that normally occurred when the Yuuzhan Vong ships no longer received commands from the yammosk.
And since Director Tarneel had so kindly stationed most of his ships and forces aboard the *Crusader*, the Peace Brigade wouldn't be in any position to attack either.
Upon joining with the Peace Brigade and Yuuzhan Vong fleets, however, those onboard the *Crusader* had been wholly surprised to see a whole host of large asteroids, and countless smaller ones, covered in yorik-coral, and with dovin basals affixed to them, floating amidst the fleet.
All it had taken was some sly flattering from Face, and Director Tarneel gleefully revealed that these asteroids were Domain Vorrik's response to the Jedi ability to detect Yuuzhan Vong in the Force. The Jedi would assume that the yorik coral-asteroids were a new type of Vong ship and would overconfidently arrange any Imperial vessels so that they could intercept these 'ships' the moment they dropped out of hyperspace. Little would the Jedi know that these asteroids wouldn't stop, but plow right through the enemy fleet, clearing a way for the rest of the Yuuzhan Vong to attack. It had already been proven successful once, Tarneel had boasted, and he couldn't wait to see the rocks in action again.
Considering that there were enough yorik coral-covered asteroids floating about to decimate an entire planet, the Yuuzhan Vong had apparently decided to go full-scale with the weapon. The asteroids were also relatively inexpensive and easy to create. The yorik coral shells would maintain the asteroid's structural integrity during the trip through hyperspace, and grew much quicker than a coralskipper or

other Yuuzhan Vong vessel. Embedded within the core of each asteroid were very high grade explosives to add devastating fragmentation damage. It was clear that if these rocks weren't taken out somehow, the Imperial fleet at Valc would be in definite trouble.
But it wasn't like the infiltration team could do much, and Ratnena had signaled that the initial plan was still on. Though Moff Flennic and the others had been warned via hyperwave transmission, Valin had a sinking feeling that the Imperials would once again underestimate the Yuuzhan Vong, to disastrous consequences.
The order for the asteroids to jump into hyperspace was given, and they could only watch as the devastating barrage of space rock leapt out of sight. Tense minutes passed.
Torkal barked a second command, and the rest of the fleet, with the *Crusader* leading the way, formed up. Within seconds, the *Drainer of Heart's Blood* jumped into hyperspace after its rocky battering ram.
And that was when the plan kicked off. Faster than anyone would have thought possible, Ratnena allowed two hold-out blasters to slip down into her hands. With a jerk of her wrist, two ruby-red darts burned its way into Torkal's head, dropping the sub-commander. She then whirled around and picked off the villip operators and helmsmen. The other warriors in the bridge tried to converge, but TC-1289 unslung the heavy repeater on his back and proceeded to mow them down with a wave of superheated metal slugs.
During the firefight, Valin noticed something peel off Torkal's face, and from his lessons on Yuuzhan Vong tech back on Mon Cal, he quickly realized that it was one of the Yuuzhan Vong ooglith masquers.
Which meant that Torkal was still alive.
Valin darted across the large bridge, searching for the sub-commander, and spotted a distortion on a wall by Ratnena. Valin reached down and freed his lightsaber from where it had been strapped around his ankle.
In the background, Ratnena and TC-1289 continued to massacre the warriors streaming into the bridge, the singular door into the room providing a perfect choke point. Neither appeared to see this moving shadow, perfectly camouflaged with the surrounding wall.
Again the lessons he had learned from Shaeri and Tahiri had kicked in. "Ratnena, Vong in a Cloak of Nuun on your right!" Valin yelled in warning.
Ratnena reacted reflexively, diving to her left without question.
Valin's eyes strained to keep up with the shifting figure. It wasn't that hard to do when he figured out that the cloaked Vong was heading directly towards him.

Valin muttered some of the curses his grandfather had taught him, activating his lightsaber and back-pedaling as the cloaked warrior charged.

His blue lightsaber blade flashed as an amphistaff whipped out of the shifting image before him; and then again as the warrior unleashed a barrage of thrusts and slashes. The warrior was much more skilled than Sah had been, and Valin found himself hard-pressed to keep up with the flurry of movements from seemingly out of nowhere. One blink, and he would have to search for the cloaked Vong all over again. A whoosh of air, and Valin rolled forward. A low growl, and Valin spun around. He couldn't even sense the warrior in the Force.

Fortunately, during his time on Coruscant, Anakin had had all of the apprentices train with the custom-made 'Vong-bots' he had created. This warrior was just like those droids, only invisible. Fighting the droids, Valin had taught himself a little trick. He had focused not on the droids, but on the air around them, on how the droids affected their surroundings.

Valin exhaled to steady his breathing, choosing to focus on the air currents around him. He could feel the swirls caused by the swing of an arm, the rush of air caused by his opponent closing in. Though absent in the Force, Valin was able to get a general sense of where the warrior was by that very gap he left. The air around them was of this galaxy, the Vong displacing it was not.

In a rush of movement, Valin dropped to one knee and stabbed his lightsaber out at a seemingly empty piece of air. There was a hiss as his lightsaber made contact. The Cloak of Nuun died from the blow, and the snarling visage of Torkal Vorrik came into view.

And then the battle was on again; Torkal pressing his attack. But Valin had grown used to the man's aggressive fighting style. After shaking off several solid blows to his saber, Valin whirled around and sliced off Torkal's off-hand. He jerked his head aside to avoid the snapping mouth of Torkal's amphistaff, and then jammed his lightsaber directly into Torkal's armpit.

The sub-commander jerked, his eyes widening in surprise. Valin pulled his blade free.

"This is for Sah Vorrik and the life he could have had," Valin said softly. In his mind, this wasn't revenge, but a dedication to a dead friend. With one last sweep of his saber, he removed Torkal's head.

"Team One has control of the dovin basal region," TC-1289 reported as the influx of warriors into the bridge momentarily died off. "Two and Three are neutralizing weapons crews."

Ratnena nodded, and darted to the primary cognition hood. "Blast it, what was that word again?" Valin heard her mutter.
"Word?"
"Hul Qat, the Vong Wraith, taught me a couple of words for this mission," Ratnena nodded, looking silly with the cognition hood covering her head. "Oh, right. *Taana dau duwii.* " *Cause the breath to release.*
A second later, the door to the bridge closed. Valin felt his ears pop as the entire ship was depressurized. The Red Moon stormtroopers were protected by their armor and enclosed air-supplies. The rest of the thousands of Yuuzhan Vong aboard the ship were not.
"Ha ha! I've never met a computer that didn't like me," Ratnena crowed, removing the hood with a grin. "Not even an organic one."
One of the villips in the cluster became inverted, appearing in the disguised face of Kell Tainer. "*This is Colonel Dissek to Yuuzhan Vong command cruiser, do you copy?*"
Ratnena moved over to the villip. "Hey Kell."
"*No problems on your end?*"
"Nope. Valin took out Sub-Commander Torkal, and the rest of the crew has been disabled. Our ETA to the Valc system is just under ten minutes."
"Same here. Let's just hope the Imps took our warning about the asteroid to heart."
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Grand Admiral Pellaeon, Moff Sarreti, and the other surviving Moffs not trapped behind enemy lines all waited patiently on their assigned vessels. Careful planning and manipulation of the Yuuzhan Vong intelligence network on Bastion had ensured a perfect trap had been laid for B'Shith Vorrik's fleet. The loss of the small Yuuzhan Vong fleet at Bescane would have been a serious blow to the Yuuzhan Vong occupiers. Though the Empire had lost seventeen capital ships as opposed to Domain Vorrik's eight, those eight still represented nearly forty-percent of all the vessels Domain Vorrik had within the Empire. Pellaeon and the others had agreed with the plan concocted by Anakin and Jacen, which used Bastion as a giant, floating target. After such serious losses, they all believed that the Yuuzhan Vong commander would try to end the conflict in a single, decisive blow to the head. In addition to all the losses the Empire had suffered, a Yuuzhan Vong victory over Bastion would be the dying Remnant's death knell.
Or at least that was what the Jedi and Imperial leaders wanted the Yuuzhan Vong to believe. Using the few Yuuzhan Vong spies that hadn't been rounded up to seed disinformation, the impression the

Imperials were giving to Domain Vorrik was that the Empire was on the verge of collapsing. Its leadership was in a panic, rounding up what ships they could to frantically scour the Empire for the Yuuzhan Vong invaders. Added to this was the fact that Grand Admiral Pellaeon had supposedly been 'assassinated' during his tour of duty and that the Imperial Navy was in disarray.

In truth, Grand Admiral Pellaeon was very much alive onboard his flagship the *Chimaera*, waiting with thirty other Star Destroyers, at Rimcee Station for the signal to jump to Bastion. Another ten ships, under Moff Sarreti, had left Bastion itself, giving the appearance that they were going to go 'Vong-hunting,' while five more Star Destroyers began taking up positions just outside the Braxant sector to add more weight to the story that it was becoming an every-ship for themselves-type atmosphere. Aiding to the frantic-atmosphere were the documentaries of the events that occurred after the fall of Empire Palpatine and during the period of the warlords that were playing on all the local HoloNet channels. Imperial agents within business and labor unions also helped to organize mass protests to make it seem like Bastion was a step away from anarchy.

The only ships still in orbit over Bastion was the *Widowmaker*, *Jade Shadow,* a half squadron of X-wings, and two squadrons of TIE Defenders. Hiding on Bastion's moon was the *Agonizer*, *Thunderflare,* and the *Imperial*-class Star Destroyer, the *Stalker*. They would be all that would be on hand to defend Bastion until the rest of the fleet arrived from the Rimcee Station.

Jacen and Anakin were aboard the *Jade Shadow*, coordinating the battlemeld and keeping a sense out for any approaching Yuuzhan Vong.

"They're coming," Jacen murmured. "Asteroids and all."

"How many?" Mara asked, while sending the alert to the rest of the Imperials.

"Asteroids? Too many to count. Bastion is definitely going to take a pummeling," Jacen said tersely. "As for the ships? About ten Yuuzhan Vong, ten non-Yuuzhan Vong vessels."

Using Jacen's vision, Anakin began relaying directions to Mara to broadcast to their allies. "We can stop the asteroids, but we're going to need to sacrifice our Interdictors and open up the chance that some of the Yuuzhan Vong will escape."

"Signal from Pellaeon, he says to go ahead with whatever you have planned. The citizens of Bastion are a priority," Jysella reported from the cockpit.

"Okay, have the *Wrack, Grappler, Aggregator, Disruptor,* and *Stellar Web* come off the hyperspace routes out of the Bastion System," Anakin quickly directed. "We're going to make use of their gravity-well projectors to create an inverted field."
Realizing what Anakin had planned, Mara glanced over her shoulder. "You're going to use five highly expensive, next-gen interdictor cruisers to create a giant repulsor-field trampoline?"
"If you know any other way to stop a hail of asteroids from bombarding the planet, I'm open to suggestions," Anakin grinned faintly, the majority of his focus still on the meld. "We're still going to need the other ships though. The *Widowmaker, Agonizer, Thunderflare, Stalker,* and the Defenders are going to have to shoot down any rocks that make it by the field. And the rest of the Jedi will have to slow down the larger asteroids so that the fields will have a chance to repulse them."
"Interdictors arriving in system now. They're moving to the coordinates you've designated," Natua reported.
"Whatever you have planned, Little Brother, do it quickly. The asteroids will be here in another five minutes, give or take a few," Jacen said in warning.
"We're going to have several burnt out Interdictors when this is done," Mara breathed, as she reiterated Anakin's instructions to the five Interdictors.
"Inverted gravitational fields appearing over Bastion."
"Asteroids arriving in system," Jacen called out shortly before the giant space rocks reverted into real space and ejected their yorik-coral shells.
Unlike the disaster at Muunilinst, however, Jacen and Anakin had known the exact location the asteroids would appear and had arranged their ships to be completely out of their path.
"Reverse interdiction field at maximum strength."
The smaller pieces of space rock, hurling at several hundred kilometers a minute and propelled by a dovin basal, were the first to hit the field. They seemed to wobble a bit as they came in contact with the gravimetric distortion being projected by the five cruisers. A few nail-biting seconds later, they slowed, then, as if they had hit a rubber barrier, flipped end over end and went flying back the way they had come. These set-and-release projectiles plowed right into the oncoming asteroids, shattering some of them into dust, or splintering other larger rocks into smaller pieces. Explosive cores detonated, shoving others off course in the process.

The Jedi had no time to admire the success of the plan as asteroids half the size of Bastion's moon barreled through these smaller pieces of debris with barely a dent.
"Have the other ships open fire on the lead piece of rock, it's moving too fast," Anakin grit out in warning.
A wave of missiles and lasers pounded the massive piece of rock, tearing off large chunks of it. One of the missiles appeared to hit the core, and the massive space boulder burst apart into thousands of tiny fragments.
"The captain of the *Grappler* reports that his gravity well generators are reaching critical levels," Jysella said. "The *Aggregator* is also reporting similar overload. They can't maintain the field for much longer."
"I've discovered the explosives in the cores of the larger asteroids," Anakin muttered, switching out of Vongsense to analyze the asteroids. "If I can detonate them…"
"Do it," Jacen said quickly.
More seconds ticked by as the giant repulsor field put out by the five Interdictor cruisers continued to withstand the withering bombardment of asteroids, using their gravity well generators in a way they were never meant to be used.
"*Disruptor* is out. The *Grappler* reports it can maintain the field for only ten more seconds."
"I've got it!" Anakin exhaled, flipping the switches of the Peace Brigade supplied explosives embedded in the cores of the larger space rocks.
"Enemy fleet has just dropped out of hyperspace," Mara called out. "The rest of the Imperial fleet is still three minutes out."
Wanting to avoid another Muunilinst, it had been decided that the first line of defenders would hold out to see what tricks the Yuuzhan Vong would deploy. That way the larger fleet could jump in prepared for the Yuuzhan Vong's strategy. What they hadn't expected was to have the entire Yuuzhan Vong fleet form into a wedge-shaped formation and press forward.
The massive asteroids erupted into equally massive balls of shrapnel as they shredded all of the neighboring asteroids into space dust and kill the momentum of those that survived. Through the clouds of dust, however, yellow streaks of plasma lanced out towards the Interdictors. There were still enough asteroids en route to Bastion that the four couldn't just abandon their positions.
Fortunately for them, the three *Imperial*-class Star Destroyers maneuvered into position in front to soak up any potential damage.
"Coralskippers inbound."

"TIEs launching."
"The Yuuzhan Vong have some type of new ship between their capital ships," Jacen noted, using his Vongsense to sweep the new arrivals for any more surprises. "It doesn't look like a combat ship, but it's advancing with the Mataloks. In fact, all capital ships are advancing at a high rate of speed. They didn't even slow down to adjust for our formation."
"Is that new ship a slaveship?" Mara guessed as she sent the *Shadow* into action against the first waves of skips.
"Not sure, probably," Jacen nodded.
The Jedi paused as Tahiri voiced her disagreement. "*Slaveships never arrive with the battle fleet, they always hang back. It might be a modified seed-ship, to reshape the planet when they're done, but they never enter combat either."*
"Another trick then," Anakin muttered, directing his girlfriend and the squadron of elite TIE Interceptors she was leading into the brunt of the fighting. "Nothing we can do about it for now."
Jacen tracked the One-Eighty-First and Waxarn Kel's people, as his brother gave the order to have shoot down the stream of plasma missiles launched at the three Star Destroyers. At the same time, Ganner, leading the two squadrons of TIE Defenders, went head-to-head with the coralskippers. With the capital ships secured, Jacen quickly maneuvered them to better meet the approaching Yuuzhan Vong fleet.
"Asteroid bombardment has been negated," Natua called out. "Three of the Interdictors burned out their gravity well projectors though. The *Wrack* has limited functionality."
Jacen mentally sent his orders to the Falleen apprentice, who nodded once.
"Informing Interdictors to withdraw from combat." There was a pause as the order was relayed. "The *Disruptor, Aggregator*, *Grappler,* and *Stellar Web* are complying. Captain Devis reports that his ship isn't out of the fight yet and is maneuvering the *Wrack* to support the *Imperial*-class Star Destroyers."
As Jacen continued to manage the capital ships, Anakin dropped deeper into the Force. His vision of the battlefield and connection to the Force, enhanced by the additions of his brother and the Death Knights in the meld, allowed him to momentarily switch into the hybrid Force-Vongsense mode to read the actions of the enemy vessels. It was only for seconds at a time, but even those seconds were better than nothing. The Death Knights, Ganner, and Tahiri, used those few

seconds to their advantage and several coralskipper squadrons were lit up in those brief moments of clarity.
"Imperial fleet two minutes out," Yaqueel chimed in, having taken over the job from Mara, who was now trying to avoid a very aggressive coralskipper squadron dogging them.
"Admiral Pryl reports that the non-Yuuzhan Vong ships are Peace Brigade," Jysella announced. "The *Thunderflash* and her TIE escort has been engaged by them off the left flank."
Jacen, who had been tracking the Yuuzhan Vong ships, frowned. "Warn the captain of the *Stalker*, that weird Yuuzhan Vong ship is headed directly for him."
"Most of the Yuuzhan Vong support ships are concentrating on our fighter cover," Anakin said, his heart missing a beat as Tahiri's X-wing narrowly avoided a barrage of plasma from several blastboulders. "It looks like they're trying to clear a path. Strange, why aren't they slowing?"
"What's that ship doing to the *Stalker*?" Natua said in confusion, as the odd-shaped vessel assumed a position directly over the Mark II Imperial Star Destroyer. Green and blue flashed up from the capital ship, but the Yuuzhan Vong's void defenses held.
Dozens of vine like tendrils unwound from the side of the alien craft and punched downwards through the Star Destroyer's armored plating, burrowing deep into the ship.
"*Agonizer* is tied up with four of the Mataloks," Jacen said tersely. "I can't get any aid to the *Stalker*."
"Imperial fleet one minute out."
Whatever the vines had done, they retracted after only a couple of seconds, leaving behind a thin film that sealed the breaches in the hull their impact had created. The *Stalker* continued to fire on the odd vessel, but as the minute went by, the ship's guns became oddly silent.
"Definitely a new weapon," Mara said grimly.
All of the Jedi could sense it as the population of the Star Destroyer went from several thousand to only a dozen.
"Stop that ship," Jacen hissed, as the odd vessel, escorted by several Yuuzhan Vong cruisers, continued straight for Bastion.
"Imperial fleet twenty seconds out."
The *Thunderflash* and *Agonizer* broke contact with their own engagements and maneuvered to intercept the Yuuzhan Vong. However, the cruiser escort proved to have formidable defenses and held off the two Star Destroyers as the odd-shaped craft continued on.

The rest of the Imperial fleet arrived, right behind the Peace Brigade ships. The combined fire of over thirty Star Destroyers decimated the ragtag navy in an instant.
"They won't get to that ship in time," Anakin held his breath as the front of the odd-shaped Vong ship began to glow from the friction of re-entry.
"Planetary defense laser are having no effect," Natua whispered. "Detecting multiple pods breaking off from the ship and spreading throughout the upper atmosphere of the planet."
One by one, the Yuuzhan Vong cruisers and other support vessels escorting the 'seed-ship' were blown away, their suicidal stands buying just enough time. The only strategy the Yuuzhan Vong appeared to have was to dedicate every signal vessel to the protection of the odd-shaped ship. Out of all the strategies Anakin, Jacen, and the Imperials had expected, a straight on suicidal charge was not one of them. Yuuzhan Vong were dying by the hundreds, but it didn't seem to matter to them as they continued to pour resources into protecting that one vessel.
"The seed-ship is in atmosphere. It's making a flyby throughout the planet. The pods it released have opened."
"*Thunderflash* reports that it has caught up to the seed-ship," Jysella said, her voice soft as she realized what was happening.
Minutes ticked by as the *Thunderfire* attempted to break through the seed-ship's defenses.
And then it hit all of the Jedi at once.
Death in so great a number that it echoed throughout the Force in a gut-wrenching wave of agony.
The apprentices doubled over, tears streaming from their eyes as they stared at Bastion. Mara's grip on the steering yoke grew white as she gritted her teeth painfully. Even Anakin and Jacen shuddered as the painful sensation of several billion people dying at once washed over them.
Domain Vorrik had once again changed their strategy, and to horrific effects. Every single ship of their fleet may have been destroyed, but the thousands of Vong that had died had succeeded in their goal. Billions of people on Bastion's surface, had been pulled into the afterlife with them.
Despite the fact that very few Imperial ships had been lost, it was a clear victory for the ever-resurgent Domain Vorrik.
Everyone was deathly silent as the seed-ship finally detonated. Domain Vorrik had been defeated, but the cost had been much too high.
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Luke supposed he should be thankful that he had time to fret and worry. The Peace Brigade and forces of Torkal Vorrik never knew what hit them. Director Tarneel and the other Peace Brigade members aboard the *Crusader* had been very easily apprehended by the ship's several hundred strong security force. The yammosk had been jammed before it could even finish pounding out its first few notes. And the asteroids that had been launched had slammed right into a minefield Colonel Stormcaller had laid down and were reduced to spacedust. The few Yuuzhan Vong ships that hadn't been hijacked had found themselves outgunned, outnumbered, and fired upon by their fellow Vong ships. They still fought to the death, but the damage they had managed to inflict was minimal.

The destruction of Torkal Vorrik's fleet had enabled the *Pride of Selonia*, *Errant Venture*, and the remaining Imperials to finally make their way back to Bastion. In their wake, they had left behind new HoloNet beacons, restoring communications between much of the Empire.

Of course, when they had all learned of what had transpired on Bastion, even the most stoic of Imperial officers had been stunned into silence. The idea that nearly every single human on the capital planet had been killed, billions and billions of lives, was unfathomable. Any high spirits that the team from the Perrinn sector had felt over their victory had immediately been dampened by the scale of the tragedy.

And so the recovery process slowly began. Ships were dispatched to mop up any remaining presence of Domain Vorrik within the Empire, non-human crew members were sent down to the planet to help the disposal of the bodies, and , with the HoloNet restored, the Jedi were reporting the situation back to the Galactic Alliance.

Luke, who was now aboard the *Errant Venture* in one of the side-lounges, was awaiting his youngest nephew after learning what had transpired on Kalee from Mara.

The doors slid open.

"Uncle," Anakin acknowledged politely.

"Anakin," Luke exhaled. He motioned to one of the bar-stools in front of the full stocked bar. "Please, have a seat.

"Aunt Mara told you about what I did?" Anakin slid into the chair soundlessly. "She warned me that you wanted to talk."

"Even if she didn't tell me about the events on Kalee, the effects of the dark side have left a clear mark on your body," Luke said, his tone a mix of worry and disapproval. Despite the two weeks that had passed since Anakin's trip to Kalee, the young man's body was still skeletal-thin and slightly pale.

"I know what I'm doing, uncle," Anakin said softly.
"Do you?" Luke questioned from the adjacent barstool. "The dark side is very insidious, addictive. If you ask anyone who has had a brush with it, they will tell you just how hard it is to break away from it once you are in its grasp."
"I'm not like Master Durron or Master Solusar," Anakin said, staring at his reflection in the mirror on the wall. "They let their dark emotions, the baser side of who they were, get the better of them."
"Over-confidence can also lead one to fall."
"Uncle, what would you say if I told you that there was no dark side of the Force? That the Force was one whole, and that it was the emotions and intentions of the users that dictated whether an action was dark or not."
"I would say that that sounds a lot like Vergere speaking," Luke said mildly. "And yes, I know your views differ slightly from hers. Mara told me of how you explained your actions."
"And?"
"And I have to say that I'm worried about you, Anakin. Ever since you returned to us from wherever you went when you left Borleias, there has been a decidedly darker shadow around you. Just look at you Anakin. Even if the Force was one, you can scarcely deny that the things you've learned are things all Jedi are warned away from."
"They're warned away because they weren't strong enough, didn't understand the theory behind the practice," Anakin stood and held out a hand. A small amount of blue flame began crackling in it. "Take Force Fire for example. The standard Jedi teachings say that this fire is borne out of the aggression and anger of the Jedi, and that it is an ability few can control without it consuming themselves. But there is another way to create it. Drawing in the warmth of the air around you, exchanging heat for cold. Just as a Jedi can produce lightning to protect, if a Jedi is in tune with his or her surroundings, they can produce flame as well. The only reason why I appear as I do now is because I absorbed Force energy that had been corrupted by the will of two dark-siders."
"What of Alema then?" Luke asked, conceding the point for the present time.
"What of her?"
"Anakin."
"Uncle Luke, Jysella and Vergere wasted no time in telling everyone what you thought of her when she took off," Anakin said, his tone slightly accusatory.
"I was right, wasn't I? She killed five of Waxarn's Jedi and took off."
"Killed in self-defense," Anakin pointed out. "They attacked first."

"Everyone else tells a different story," Luke said.
"Even Tahiri?"
"She's too close to you," Luke shook his head. "Given your relationship with each other…"
"What about Mara and the apprentices?"
"They back up the accounts of Maez and Waxarn's other Knights."
Anakin raised an eyebrow. "Out of curiosity, uncle, what *is* everyone else saying?"
"That Alema admitted to being a Sith and launched an unprovoked attack on the Death Knights because they learned the truth. Vergere said she felt a similar shift in the Force while she was in the temple."
"And you believe them?"
"They, Mara included, have no reason to be dishonest."
"And I do?" Anakin's eyes narrowed ever so slightly as he regarded his uncle.
Luke tried to ignore the hurt that flashed from Anakin's Force presence. The Jedi Grandmaster still recalled the words he had spoken when Anakin's Force presence had returned, *and a dark rise begins.* He still remembered the nightmarish vision he had received after Ebaq 9.
"I don't know what to make of you anymore, Anakin. I'm afraid that whatever you have learned has changed you for the worst."
"You don't trust me," Anakin remarked. He let out a slow breath and glanced towards a side door. "Is that why you have Kyp and Corran in the next room?"
"They're not following any instructions of mine. It's not about trusting you, or your judgment, Anakin," Luke shook his head. "You are strong in the Force, have always gone your own way. I just want to make sure that you're aware of the path you are on."
"Uncle, I *am* a Jedi," Anakin insisted, now truly unable to hide the hurt he was feeling. "I may not be the Jedi your mind pictures, or a Jedi like Corran, Kyp, or Jaina, but I am a Jedi first and foremost."
Luke was far from reassured. "Anakin, you and Alema were the only two able to absorb the energy of the Force nexus, energy which you admit was corrupted. Even Mara said she wouldn't have been able to do as the two of you had. You openly say that there is no dark side of the Force; that the reason why centuries of Jedi don't believe as you do was because they did not have the self-control and strength required. Do you *know* what that sounds like?"
Anakin felt frustration build as he stared down his uncle. "If you want me to say something then tell me what you're looking for? Yes, alright, I supported Alema, even when I knew that the Jedi weren't for her. I supported her because she's my friend? Lightning? Flame? I already

explained those to you. There is more than one way to achieve the same powers the Sith use. I'm far from the perfect Jedi everyone in the media says I am. I *am* allowed to make mistakes, or has that changed too?"
"Mistakes are one thing. What about this?" Luke procured a sleek black lightsaber, the one Anakin had created during his training under Brisha. The one from Luke's vision. Luke activated it, and the blood red blade emerged.
Anakin raised an eyebrow. "That is lightsaber. A very functional weapon wielded by Force users since ancient times and…"
"Anakin." Luke said firmly, deactivating the blade.
"It's mine," Anakin said calmly. "A backup lightsaber in case my lambent one fails."
"And the color?"
"It was the only crystal I had on hand when I was creating it. How did you get it?"
"When we were sweeping the Imperial ships for Yuuzhan Vong spy devices, we found this under your bunk," Luke explained, letting Anakin take the saber back.
"Master Skywalker, if you're going to punish me or reprimand me, just do it already," Anakin said tiredly, hooking the saber onto his utility belt.
"No one said anything about punishment."
"I already told you that I'm well aware of what I'm doing. I'm no more likely to become a Sith than you."
"If you forget, I *did* fall once," Luke reminded. "Being strong in the Force doesn't make one immune from their, as you called them, baser emotions. You've started down a path few Jedi have the opportunity to recover from. Please, for the sake of yourself, your parents, Jaina and Jacen, think about where your path will lead you. That's all I want to say."
"I had three months to think about the Force when I was training with Alema," Anakin said, his own tone changing to one of understanding. "I've put a lot of thought into doing what I am. This is for the best, for everyone. Only by embracing both the light and dark sides of myself will I ever be able to reach my full potential."
Luke couldn't help but shudder at those words, despite the soft deliverance, the shadow he had seen around Anakin in his visions had returned with a vengeance, looming threateningly around his nephew.
"If you're sure, then do what you think is best. Force knows that my judgment isn't the clearest when it's come to you and your siblings."
"Thank you, Master Skywalker."

As Anakin left the room, and Luke slumped exhaustedly in his chair, a third figure tilted her head, pleased with the results. She silently excused herself from the doorjamb and followed after Anakin. There were some benefits to being small in the Force, after all; physically as well as mentally.

"Now, young Solo," Vergere whispered, watching him brood as he walked through the corridors of the ship. "How will you deal with the hand I have dealt you? Your masters are against you, you will slowly lose your friends. Show me what Lumiya has taught you. Show me your rise to greatness. Will it be you, or your brother, who will carve your way through this galaxy and to your destiny? Which of you will be strong enough to face what is still to come?"

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"What happened, Farmboy?" Mara muttered, sliding into the seat Anakin had vacated.

"I don't know," Luke replied, still hanging his head as Mara rubbed his back. "The words I wanted to say didn't come out, and the words I didn't want to say came out instead. Maybe, maybe just seeing my youngest nephew looking like a skeleton brought out all the worry in me."

"Didn't I tell you that the only danger Anakin posed was to himself?" Mara said. "He won't go dark, not as long as he has Tahiri, Jaina, and Jacen looking out for him. You told me that you wanted to see that for yourself, that you wanted to understand him better."

"I know," Luke sighed, running a hand through his sandy hair, streaked with more grey than he would have liked. He wasn't even fifty yet, and yet, at times, he felt much older. "I know what I said. Just as I know that I can't take it back. When he walked through that door though, it was like all my fears, all my worries, were suddenly amplified. The same traits I admire about Anakin, his ability to lead, to convince people to do things that they might not normally do, are the same traits that make him so much more dangerous when added with his mastery of the Force. And once I started talking, taking the conversation in one direction, I couldn't stop. "

"Well, like you said, what's done is done," Mara clapped his back. "Now we have to figure out how to fix this mess or we might actually lose our nephew."

"At least Anakin's the only one giving me a headache," Luke smiled faintly. "I wouldn't know what to do if both Jacen and Jaina decided to walk a similar path as well. That'd probably make me question everything I thought I knew about the Force."

"Me too," Mara said. "And I have to admit, Anakin's view of the Force does make sense."
Luke glanced at his wife. "There is one question I do have."
"Shoot."
"When I confronted Anakin with Alema, he said she fought in self-defense. That Waxarn's Knights had cornered her and attacked her. Yet you and everyone else I've spoken to said that *she* was the one who attacked first."
"Well she…did?" Mara shook her head once, as if trying to clear it. "She did…I think."
"Mara?" Luke reached out to her through the Force, sensing confusion.
"It's strange, now that you mentioned Anakin's version of events." Mara frowned, her eyes fluttering shut. "It's like I've seen them before in a dream. Hazy, not quite right. I mean, I have one very clear memory of Alema attacking first. But then I have this second memory, as if it was just a vision, of Trina, Doreil and the others making the first move."
More than concerned now, Luke very gently touched his wife's mind. She granted him access immediately, and he saw the two versions of events. In one, he could see Alema proclaiming herself a dark Jedi and launching an all-out attack on the startled Death Knights. In the other, he could see Alema fending off the Waxarn's Knights as they tried to attack her. He pulled himself out of Mara's mind.
"The hazier version is most likely the true one."
"Are you sure?" Mara said, touching a finger to her forehead.
"If Alema truly was a dark Jedi bent on slaughtering all of you, you wouldn't have just sat on the sidelines," Luke pointed out.
"No, that's not enough. I was defending Jysella and the others in case Alema turned her blade on them," Mara shook her head. Her hand curled into a small fist. "Damn it. How could someone have messed with my head without me even realizing it?"
"There's only one other person I know with such capabilities," Luke said, meeting his wife's angered gaze.
"Vergere," Mara hissed.
"Vergere," Luke nodded. "We need proof, though."
"She wouldn't have left any evidence if it was her. The best we can do is keep a careful eye on her from now on."
"What I want to know is why she would alter the events like she has?" Luke said, puzzled. "Why is how we view Alema important?"
"And what does she have to gain," Mara nodded. "When I was with them, I got the impression that Alema and Vergere weren't on the best of terms. Alema must have discovered something. Something

important and worth enough for Vergere to blow the 'I'm-an-innocent-teacher' act to chase Alema out."
"I have a feeling we're missing one vital clue that will give us the answers we need," Luke murmured. "And the Force is telling me that unless we find it, the shadow I see hovering around Anakin will consume him entirely."
=}Chapter End{=
A\N: More on the Luke/Anakin argument to come in Book 3 of the Force Heretic Trilogy. Decided to make this update a double-update...two chapters for everyone!

ADA 47 Interlude VI

Forty-Seven
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Anakin stared out the observation port on the nose cone of the privately owned Star Destroyer with a myriad of thoughts running through him. In the background, he could hear the faint sound of a HoloNet player, already reporting on the massive losses taken by the empire. Words such as 'revenge of the Jedi,' and 'Anakin's failure,' continued to echo in his mind, joining the harsh words of his uncle and Waxarn Kel's followers.
Though he hadn't been the leader of the mission to the Remnant, the media was already dubbing him as such. Added to the fact was that the Death Knights and some of the embittered members of Kyp's Dozen, were already pointing fingers in his direction. 'Insufficient planning,' 'failure to heed the advice of others,' 'recklessness that got others killed,' and of course Anakin's favorite, 'the next Sith Lord,' were becoming common words whenever someone on the HoloNet, or even in the ship, was talking about him.
The Death Knights and members of Kyp's Dozen had every right to be angry, Anakin thought, staring out at the vast array of stars in deep thought. Again, he had taken a bunch of Jedi out on a mission. Again, nearly sixty percent of those Jedi had died and yet his closer friends and family remained among the living. This time, however, he couldn't even point to a successful mission to justify those lives lost.
He would be the first to admit that the plan to save the Remnant had more or less failed. Nearly every single major population center had been devastated in some way. Bastion was completely devoid of human life. Borosk was a crater world that didn't even have an atmosphere anymore. Muunilinst was ravaged nearly beyond repair, a part of its core leaking from a focused bombardment. Even Yaga Minor

had been completely razed and turned into a burning ball of plasma much like Barab I was now.
And those were just the planets.
The Empire's vaunted navy had lost nearly forty percent of its forces, its shipyards were in ruins, and had civilian casualties in the tens of billions. Whole planets were no longer livable. Entire economies had been smashed to pieces and stretched beyond sustainable levels. The few planets that managed to survive unscathed had had their infrastructure ravaged by the increased burdens the rest of the Empire placed on it. Food on some planets was scarce, on others it was medical supplies, others still lacked power generators or tech used to keep up their usual standards of living. Though Domain Vorrik had been defeated, the secretive Yuuzhan Vong Domain had successfully taken the once mighty Empire down with them.
All in the span of a single month.
Even though it still maintained a majority of its military strength, the Remnant's future once the war was over was fairly bleak. With only the war sustaining and united it, the Imperial Remnant had truly been reduced to a remnant of a remnant. Without considerable outside aid, it would be a very long time before the former galactic power would be able to recover even a fraction of its dominance in their little corner of the galaxy.
Of course, the fighting hadn't started until the Jedi had arrived to 'help,' so naturally some of the blame was being placed on their shoulders; on Anakin's shoulders specifically, once it got out that it was he who convinced the High Council to let the Jedi interfere in the affairs of a foreign government.
And in a way, they were right. It felt like Myrkr all over again, with the sequence of events spiraling out of his control. He would like to think that there hadn't been another way, that the way the events had unfolded had been the best possible outcome. But he knew that he would be fooling himself if he did. A disaster was what the mission to the Remnant had been. The critics were right in that it had been his idea to intervene. If he hadn't brought along everyone else, maybe the galaxy would be a dozen or so Jedi stronger, and billions of people would still be alive.
The HoloNet continued to play in the distance, and Anakin's shoulders slumped visibly as he struggled to contain his emotions. He was tired of it all. Hero one day, villain the next. Murderer of Hapans, Genius of Ebaq Nine, Liberator of Hutt Space, next Jedi Grandmaster, Galactic Alliance's Folly, the next Sith Lord. It was quite an eclectic and

contradictory collection of titles he had developed, and most definitely confusing.
Though he knew what he was, just a Jedi Knight with slightly unorthodox views of the Force, it seemed like the rest of the galaxy didn't see him as such.
Anakin felt a pair of arms wrap around him as Tahiri pressed her face against his back. He shifted, bringing her around to his front, and hugging her close.
"Hey," he said softly, just holding her to him. In the storm of criticism and failures that was the past campaign, at least she had still survived. At least his idiocy hadn't gotten her killed.
"Negatude, off, now," Tahiri ordered, looking up at him with determined green eyes.
"Negatude, well deserved," Anakin remarked bitingly, unable to hold her gaze as he just absently rubbed her back.
"Negatude making girlfriend unhappy."
"Negatude making *me* unhappy," Anakin said with a bitter laugh.
Tahiri reached up, gently caressing his face with a single hand. "You're not all knowing or all powerful, Anakin."
"That's good, I don't want to be," Anakin said, exhaling and feeling tears form at the corners of his eyes. The burdens being placed on his shoulders were becoming too much. If he did well, the galaxy expected more. If he failed, then all the problems of the galaxy were his to deal with anyways and everyone else's failures were his as well. "Someone else can take all that power and stuff it. I'm just tired of it all. Tired of the pressure, of the expectations, of all the doubts, and looks of disbelief. Of the accusatory stares, of Jedi dying because of my decisions. Of being *the* hero everyone turns to, and the villain everyone turns away from when things don't work out. I just…I don't know…Can I even quit?" He finished hoarsely, gripping Tahiri to him as he tried to reign in the storm of emotions boiling over.
Some part of him didn't even care that the other Force sensitives in the fleet might pick up on it. He was fed up with being a super-Jedi, maybe it was time the others saw him as just a plain, regular human. Or would seeing him in such a weakened state only invite more scorn? Would his inability to bounce back from this like all the previous disasters cement their opinion of him as some dark lord in waiting?
Unexpectedly, Anakin felt a surge of warmth and support cram its way through the bond he had with Tahiri. Startled, he looked down and saw her green eyes, sharp and clear, gazing up at him.
"Negatude, off," Tahiri repeated, sharing with him her feelings and love, her admiration and understanding. Her Force presence was like a

warm summer sun and crisp breeze after an icy cold night, blowing away the chill and darkness with authority. In her thoughts he could see just how much she loved him, how much she still had his back despite everything that had occurred.
So what if everyone shunned him or looked at him as if he had grown an extra head? She had plenty of experience with that after she decided to keep her forehead scars. Sith Lord? That was nothing considering everyone else, for the longest time, thought that she had become some sort of Yuuzhan Vong agent. When there had been debates as to whether to stick her in the brig or in a science lab to be analyzed. But he had believed in her, supported her and gotten her through what was probably the worst year of her life. Now it was time for her to return the favor.
Anakin exhaled again, trying his best to smile and send her his gratefulness in return. "Thanks."
Tahiri stood on the tips of her toes and planted a gentle kiss on his lips. "Of course, dummy."
Anakin closed his eyes, trying his best to shut off his 'negatude.' A very bad habit of his, he realized upon further reflection, that he thought he had gotten rid of after his stay on the *Home*. Evidently not.
"Well," Anakin said with a weak laugh. "I'm the bad guy again."
Listening to the distant HoloNet broadcast, Tahiri nodded. She kept her arms locked around his waist and her head pressed against his chest. "Sounds that way. Good thing Alema's not here, she would have found you even more attractive."
"Yeah," Anakin smirked faintly.
"How do you think she's doing?"
"Fine, I hope. I really hope she makes it through this war okay, though. A lone Jedi out there is just asking for Yuuzhan Vong trouble."
"She's a tough Twi'lek, though. I'd be more afraid for any Yuuzhan Vong who run into her."
"Is it wrong to say I miss her already?" Anakin looked to his girlfriend. "I mean, she had that un-shaded view of the galaxy that no one else seemed to have. Saw things for what they were, light or dark."
"It's not wrong. She's an…interesting…person to have as a friend," Tahiri smiled wryly. "Jysella's missing her like crazy too. I think she liked having an unconventional older sister."
Anakin chuckled. "Unconventional, that's definitely Alema."
"She'll probably end up in trouble of the Alema-sort," Tahiri said, shaking her head ruefully. "That girl never could live an uneventful life."

"I have a feeling we'll see Alema again, though," Anakin said, focusing on the warmth, both physical and Force-bond related, Tahiri provided.
Tahiri made a noise of agreement, and then took one of Anakin's hands in his. "Come on, Solo. Let's go to bed. Enough thinking for today."
"How about tomorrow?" Anakin felt the sense of dread slowly return.
Tahiri swatted his arm. "Whatever happens tomorrow, happens. Only a dummy will worry about what we can't change. We'll face tomorrow together, and the day after that together, and the day after that. No matter what happens, no matter how challenging or stupid this galaxy gets, you'll face it with me at your side."
"And us too."
Both Anakin and Tahiri looked up to see Jaina and Jacen standing in the doorway of the room. His brother and sister closed the distance quickly, wrapping up both he and Tahiri and a reassuring group hug.
"You're crazier than I thought if you thought you could take all that abuse by yourself," Jacen said, ruffling Anakin's hair. He tilted his head at Anakin's still skeletal appearance. "Although, if you absorb any more dark side Force energy in the future, I'm going to have to revise my opinion of you."
"We've got your back, Little Brother," Jaina said firmly, her brown eyes flashing as she gripped Anakin's face between her hands and forced him to look at her. "Don't let those bantha herders get to you. You did the best you could with the information you had, and I didn't see anyone else willing to step up and help out the Remnant before you brought the issue up."
"What they said," Ganner called out from the door. "Don't worry about the media, Fearless Leader. I'll do my best to get everyone raving about the great hero you are in no time."
"Don't," Anakin managed to say. He had his brother on one side of him, Jaina on the other, and Tahiri still wrapped up against his torso. From the love and support he was receiving from them, he finally managed to push through his negatude. "Don't, Ganner. This is a good thing."
"Good thing?" Several voice said at once.
"Think about it," Anakin said, taking a pause to briefly kiss his girlfriend. "Let's say I become that hero again. What then? Everything returns to the status quo. Everyone once again starts looking to me for leadership and advice. It'll be just like Uncle Luke's situation all over again. They'll follow me, no matter how bad things get until I run into another Myrkr, another Remnant. At least this way there is no one figurehead that the entire Order relies on to get things done. At least this way, the true power of the Jedi Order will rest in the council, not me or Uncle Luke, or any one person."

Ganner, still standing in the doorway, blinked dumbly. "Are we going back to Plan Hapes again? Because that one didn't really work out so well either."
Anakin smiled genuinely and shook his head. "No, we'll let the Death Knights and whoever else just say what they want to. Let the situation run its course. The media will eventually get bored of me the moment someone else does something worth mentioning. I just have to weather it until then."
"Oh good," Ganner said. "So, what's the plan then?"
"You do realize I just said I'll leave the planning to the council from now on?"
"Officially, yeah," Ganner nodded. "But I'm an unofficial type of guy. Your unofficial orders, Fearless Leader?"
Anakin glanced at his siblings in bewilderment.
"What do you expect, it's Ganner," Jaina said, shaking her head in amusement.
Anakin rolled his eyes. "Fine, I order you to do what the High Council orders, and to be your usual self whenever events call for it."
"Are you sure you want to add that last part?" Jacen said in mock whisper. "He *is* Ganner."
"I'm sure," Anakin said.
Ganner smirked and gave a mock-salute. "As you command, Jedi Knight Solo. I shall go forth and astound the galaxy with my many skills."
"Take care of yourself, Ganner," Tahiri said, grinning.
"Will do," Ganner nodded once. "I'll see what I can do about taking the Death Knights and more disgruntled Jedi with me. That way you guys won't have to put up with their scowling faces every time you see them."
"Thanks a lot."
"No problem. You just keep on working to end this war. I'm perfectly happy with the easy stuff like that." Ganner gave a wave and then departed.
"Speaking of ending the war," Jaina looked to the others. "My trip to the Ascendancy paid off in more ways than one."
"Zonama Sekot?" Jacen said.
Jaina grinned broadly. "Zonama Sekot."
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With the destruction of the Yuuzhan Vong fleets at Bastion, Bescane, and Valc, the Empire's Yuuzhan Vong crisis had come to an end. Small garrisons and patrols still remained, but mop-up crews were clearing them out system by system. Communication buoys were being

deployed to restore the HoloNet within the Remnant, and the surviving Moffs slowly began to return to their sectors.
Domain Rin, with the Jedi acting as intermediaries, sent delegates to Grand Admiral Pellaeon and Moff Flennic, to negotiate their continued stay within the Remnant. As short a campaign as it was, Domain Vorrik had caused all sorts of damage to the planets they had conquered, and Domain Rin definitely had their work cut out for them.
After learning that the slaves underneath the Shaping compound had been well-cared for under Ne'rai's leadership, both Imperial leaders were willing to give the Yuuzhan Vong shapers a chance. The only stipulation Pellaeon and Flennic had placed on the Shapers was that any and all Vong-tech they created would immediately be shared with the team of Imperial scientists under Director Roleesta Stone and Sanix Fous' control. Corran, Shaeri, and several members of Domain Rin then headed off back to Mon Calamari on the *Pulsar Skate,* to inform the Freed Yuuzhan Vong Supreme Council, and the Galactic Alliance Senate, of the new developments.
Not all the news updates were positive, unfortunately. General Crispin's grim report to all concerned parties drew attention to the fact that several Yuuzhan Vong ships had managed to run his blockade and escape the Remnant. The possibility that these ships contained the anti-Yuuzhan Vong virus, or the equally devastating anti-human virus, was all too real, and safeguards were being put up throughout the Galactic Alliance. The ships still had a long way to go to reach Coruscant, and it was everyone's hope that they would be intercepted before then. Wraith Squadron, the *Pride of Selonia*, and the *Errant Venture,* had immediately taken off after the ships, doing what they usually did—bouncing from one galactic-endangering event to another. Though Jaina had arrived too late to warn the others about the virus-laden vessel, and was wholly distraught over the massive losses Bastion had taken, she had had a bittersweet reunion with the rest of her family. Joy jockeyed with exasperation at Anakin's emaciated state, while she noticed that Jacen had a new sense of peace and calmness about him. When she asked about how the two ended up as they had, they looked at each other, grinned, then gave her a sheepish shrug.
Some good did come out of the losses the Empire had sustained. The destruction of Borosk and the devastation of Bastion had spurred the surviving Moffs into realizing that they couldn't maintain their isolationist policies any longer. Once again unnerving the Galactic Alliance's diplomatic corps, who had to rush over to the Empire to help work out the details, Leia and the other Jedi convinced the other Moffs of the benefits of an alliance.

With the Empire's treaty with the Galactic Alliance, Star Destroyers and other vessels were immediately dispatched to shore up the frontlines. Waxarn Kel and the Death Knights, as well as Kyp and his surviving Dozen, joined Ganner to assist the Imperial Navy in waging war against the Yuuzhan Vong. If anyone found it ironic that Jedi were once again leading legions of stormtroopers and Imperial pilots into battle, no one spoke up. The war was far from over, but it was clear that another turning point had been reached.

All that was left now was the news Jaina had originally come to the Empire to deliver.

"I know where Zonama Sekot is," Jaina announced to the gathering of remaining Jedi, which consisted almost entirely of her family and extended family. Only the apprentices and Vergere were not related to her in some way, since, in her mind, Tahiri was already a Solo.

"The Chiss starmaps?" Leia guessed.

"Yes," Jaina pulled out the datacard the Chiss had given her and plugged it into the projector. A map of the galaxy, appeared, with a singular light flashing in the Unknown Regions.

"There?" Mara raised an eyebrow. "The hyperspace lanes there are wholly unstable."

"It explains why no one's found it since then," Jacen opined. "It's the perfect hiding place for a moving planet."

"So are we all going then?" Han raised an eyebrow.

"If Zonama's hiding, I don't think it would be a good idea," Jacen shook his head. "According to the stories, Zonama's a living, sentient being. If it moved there to hide, then it was fleeing something or someone."

"Possibly the Yuuzhan Vong," Vergere spoke up. "Its location is far away from where I last encountered it."

"So only some of us go then," Mara said.

"If no one objects, I would like to be among them," Vergere held the gazes of the others. "I grew rather fond of the planet, and I would like to meet it again."

"That'd help ease its worries," Jacen nodded.

"Luke and I will go as well," Mara said calmly, pinning the Fosh Force-user with a mild stare that said 'I know you're up to something.' Vergere just blinked owlishly at her in turn.

"We'll take the apprentices back to Mon Calamari," Leia spoke up, motioning to herself and Han.

"And we'll go with Uncle Luke and Aunt Mara," Jaina said, including her brothers in her statement. "We can take the *Jade Shadow* there."

"Good luck then," Tahiri said reluctantly.

"You're not coming?"

The blond Jedi shook her head. "Taan and Shaeri told me that they'll be needing my help to handle Domain Rin and the Omega Blue mess. As much as I want to come, the Freed Yuuzhan Vong need me more."
"Same here," Danni looked disgruntled. "The science divisions are all over the place and need help consolidating their data and efforts. For some reason, Cal Omas thinks I'm best for doing that and tapped me for the new position of 'Director of Allied Research Divisions'."
"I guess it's decided then?" Mara glanced at the gathered crowd for any sign of disagreement.
"I guess so," Han remarked. "Look after my kids, Luke."
Luke smiled and nodded. "I will."
"Well then," Vergere grinned, rubbing her hands together. "Let's go re-discover Zonama Sekot.
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It was a bittersweet goodbye and a reminder that even their love couldn't overcome the demands created by the war. Tahiri stood before the airlock, her green eyes searching Anakin's as she struggled to come to terms with their parting.
"You'll be okay?" Tahiri said, her hands gripping Anakin's tightly. Despite the group hug earlier, she could still feel the tension radiating off of him and leaving his side just didn't feel right at all.
That, and she just didn't like leaving his side, period. Since his return from his training nearly a year ago, they had yet to stray too far from each other. But now that she was heading to Mon Calamari, and he to Zonama Sekot, they would soon have an entire galaxy separating them. It made her young heart clench painfully as she tried her best to find some reason to stay at his side, something that would trump the duty placed on their shoulders.
"I should be okay, shouldn't I?" Anakin breathed, swallowing heavily. "I'll be far away from any holocam, or reporter, or anyone else for that matter. Should be a relaxing break compared to everything else that's happened. Go on, the others need you more."
"I'm not in love with 'the others,'" Tahiri said in a soft voice, lightly tugging on their joint hands so that Anakin was pulled into a loose embrace. His arms immediately tightened around her smaller form, causing her to whimper softly. "They aren't my best friend."
Anakin buried his nose into her hair, once more drawing on their bond to strengthen the both of them. They had grown so much closer since the last time they had been apart, shared so much together. A part of him wanted to forget about pesky, hyperdrive equipped planets and return back to Mon Calamari with her. But another part of him feared that return.

Until the galaxy found someone else to hate, he was a pariah, would be a lightning rod for everyone else's frustrations. His presence would only fracture an Order he and the others had just united, not to mention cause all sorts of trouble for the politicians. If he returned, he might have been at Tahiri's side, but peace was something neither of them would know for a very long time. Rather, it was best he found Zonama Sekot and helped end the war. Maybe then they could finally have the time they so desperately wanted together. But of course setting off to find the planet meant leaving her side, and he loathed it just as much as she did.

As his siblings looked on, Anakin sensed that his eminent separation with Tahiri was making Jaina once again feel the loneliness and regret of leaving Jag, and Jacen's slightly better shielded whimsical feelings for the distant Queen Mother on the other side of the galaxy.

He shoved those forlorn emotions aside and inhaled deeply, focusing instead the way Tahiri just seemed to fit against him.

"You sure you just can't come with us?" Anakin whispered, his eyes closed. He knew that she couldn't, knew that she knew that he knew, but he had to ask anyways. Maybe, during a single moment, reality would shift just enough to make the impossible possible.

"All you have to do is ask," Tahiri muttered in response, holding him just as tightly as she kept her head over his heart. She was trembling, doing her best not to give in to her more selfish impulses. Despite her young age, she too had more responsibilities than the average girl her age; nearly half of an alien race looked to her for stability. "As long as you're at my side, I'll go anywhere you want me to. Just ask."

Anakin exhaled shakily, his resolve crumbling. If the fate of the galaxy didn't hinge on his discovery, if there was no war to fight or politicians to appease, if they could just be two ordinary teenagers enjoying the love they had for each other…so many things he wished were true but never could be. *Kriff the war for destroying his childhood.* It was a screwed up galaxy indeed if it needed teenagers to fight its wars and guarantee the safety of trillions.

Again tears stung at the corners of his eyes as he focused on his girlfriend. Why was he fighting for peace and happiness for others if the galaxy continued to deny him those very things? And the Force definitely had a very bad sense of timing. Just when things were going downhill for him, it was going to send his girlfriend to the other side of the galaxy.

"I love you, Anakin," Tahiri whispered softly, her hands absently stroking his back as her own tears disappeared into the fabric of his shirt.

"Love you too," Anakin managed, his throat tight. "You take care of yourself, okay?"
"Uh huh, you too 'kay?" Tahiri tilted her head back to look up at him with glimmering green eyes.
He kissed her gently, letting his thumb trace the curve of her cheek. "I'll be fine."
"You better be," Tahiri said faintly, taking a step back before the parting became too hard for her. With equal reluctance, he let her, the strength of their bond allowing them to read each other's thoughts.
"Go on, Hero Boy. Find the planet that will end the war, and then we can have all the time in the galaxy. You do that, and we can be together again."
"Most girlfriends don't demand that their boyfriend end an inter-galactic war as a condition of their relationship," Anakin laughed softly.
Tahiri smiled weakly as well, taking another step back so that she was now on the shuttle-side of the airlock. "Well I'm lucky that you're probably the only boyfriend in the galaxy that *can* meet that condition."
"Good luck with the Supreme Council," Anakin said, his emotional barriers rising.
The airlock door began to slowly close.
"Good luck with Zonama Sekot," Tahiri chimed, waving. "See you soon."
The airlock door closed, and the shuttle Tahiri stepped on powered up and pulled away.
Both Jaina and Jacen stepped forward, placing supportive hands on their brother.
"Anakin?" Jacen said gently.
"I'm okay," Anakin swallowed heavily. "Come on, we have a planet to find and a war to end."

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"Hey, Adventure Boy. How long are you going to sleep?" Sannah whispered softly, gripping Doran's hand lightly. The emotional toll his unresponsiveness was taking on her was greater than she wanted to admit. She felt so helpless, so useless, and in need of a good hug. "It's already been two weeks now. Wake up, please."
Physically, his body had been fixed; a combination of Force healing techniques and cloned tissue had repaired the damage the shapers had inflicted on him. But he had yet to open his eyes or show any indication that he could hear her. Reaching out to him through the Force didn't work either. He was there in front of her, but he wasn't.

The door to the med-bay slid open and Sannah felt the two Purge survivors enter; the Kamino Jedi scientist and healer, Kina Ha, and the red-haired Jedi human, nicknamed Scout. Both moved to the opposite side of Doran's bed.
"He is unchanged?" Kina Ha said.
Sannah offered the older Jedi a wan expression and nodded. "Hasn't so much as twitched in the last two weeks. Even when I tried tickling him."
"Then it's probably what Bardan thought," Scout said to her companion. "We've ruled out everything else."
"You can help him?" Sannah said hopefully.
"What do you know of a Jedi ability called *Morichro*?" Kina Ha asked kindly.
Sannah shook her head. "I've never heard of it."
"One of the many abilities lost during the Purge I suspect," Kina Ha sighed.
"Master Yaddle *was* one of the last known masters of the ability," Scout agreed with a sad grimace. She then motioned to Doran. "But it's clear that your friend has learned that ability from somewhere."
"Which is a good thing, as it probably saved his life," Kina Ha said.
"What does this mori-chro do?" Sannah looked to the two Jedi.
"*Morichro* is a deep form of meditation," Scout answered. "So deep that the body's vital functions slow to a crawl and enter a state of near stasis.""And this saved his life?"
"Undoubtedly," Kina Ha nodded. "The trauma his body endured would have been enough to kill a Jedi even in a regular Force trance. By essentially putting himself into stasis, his mind and body minimized the damage it received."
"So how do we bring him out of it?" Sannah said, wringing her hands helplessly as she looked back to her best friend.
"Before dropping into the trance, the user can make it so that a trigger phrase can wake him," Scout explained. "It's used primarily for a hibernation trance, but it can also be used for someone in *morichro*."
"A phrase," Sannah whispered to herself.
"It would be something only the people he trusted would know," Scout nodded.
Sannah's mind raced as she tried to come up with a phrase. There were so many possible things. She began whispering words, praying that some combination would work. Everything from 'I need you' to 'wake up you idiot,' and more. But none of them seemed to work. Just when Sannah was growing desperate, another voice spoke up.

"Can I try?" Dinua asked from the doorway of the room. "I heard most of the explanation. I just say the magic words and he wakes up, right?"
"That's the gist of it," Scout said in affirmative.
"Sannah?"
"Go ahead and try," Sannah whispered hoarsely.
The three other Jedi shifted aside to let her step to the head of Doran's bed.
"Hey, Doran, *K'atini*!" A few seconds ticked by, but nothing happened. Dinua frowned at first, but then glanced sidelong at Sannah for a long moment. She smiled faintly and bent to Doran's ear again.
"Hey, Adventure Boy! *K'atini*!"
Seconds ticked by again. But then, to the surprise of everyone, Doran stirred. His chest began to rise and fall more regularly, and his eyes began to flutter.
"How did you know?" Sannah gasped.
Dinua shrugged, gripping the bed-sheet tightly, her eyes suspiciously moist, as she waited for Doran to return to consciousness. "A bit of you, a bit of me. It's what I would have chosen if I were him."
Finally, Doran opened his eyes and looked around the room in a slight daze.
"Thanks," Doran managed hoarsely, locking eyes with Dinua.
Dinua smirked and ran a hand through Doran's hair fondly, before giving him a playful shove. "Took you long enough, you *mir'osik."*
"Oh?"
"You worried your girlfriend here," Dinua jerked a thumb at a wide-eyed Sannah and then stepped aside.
"Hi Fish-Girl," Doran rasped. He blinked as he focused on her. "You look different."
Sannah flung herself out of her chair and into his medical bed, hugging him fiercely. "You stupid, dundering, inconsiderate nerf brain! Don't you ever worry me like that again!" She hated being that weepy, needy, girlfriend type, but at the moment, she couldn't care less. She had Doran back and that was all that mattered.
"Ouch, ouch! When did you get muscles?" Doran breathed as Sannah continued to squeeze the stuffing out of him. "And who are you calling 'inconsiderate'?"
The others filed out of the room, with Dinua giving Doran one last, long look before the doors closed behind her.
Sannah eventually released her grip, sitting on the side of Doran's bed and taking one of his hands in both of her own. She opened their bond fully, wanting the reassurance of his presence after feeling his normally powerful aura so muted for so long.

Damn it, she was being needy again…If Dinua was still here, the Mandalorian teen would probably make a few snide comments and call her a *dar'manda* again.
"Wow," Doran finally managed, just looking at Sannah after taking a long sip of water.
"Wow?"
"You look amazing," Doran said with a grin.
Sannah fought back her blush as she tilted her head upwards, maybe hanging out with Dinua wasn't that bad after all. "As opposed to before?"
"No, no," Doran said quickly. "Before you were cute and adorable. Now you're amazing and sexy."
Sannah raised an eyebrow, trying to look as intimidating as possible even as his comments caused her cheeks to warm. "So I wasn't amazing and sexy before?"
"Hey, come on, Fish-Girl! I just woke up from a trance," Doran whined.
"I know, Dinua was the one that woke you up," Sannah commented, hiding a smile as she folded her arms in front of her. "I was sitting at your side for over ten days, worried my mind out, and all I had to do was tell you to 'suck it up'?"
Doran winced. "When I was in that tight situation with the Yuuzhan Vong shapers, all I could think about was what Dinua would say to me if she saw me. She's very motivational you know."
Sannah's smile broke through. "Yeah, she is. She's scary-cool though."
"Yeah," Doran breathed. "She is."
Sannah leaned into him once more, squeezing his hand lightly. "I'm glad you're back, Adventure Boy. The adventures haven't been fun without you."
Doran glanced around the room. "Kyrimorut?"
"You've been here before?" Sannah confirmed.
"After we graduated, Jintar invited Dinua, me, and mom back here. Is Kal Skirata still around? He has some great stories if you have the time. Oh, and if you've met…mphf!"
Sannah had slipped herself under the covers and then promptly silenced Doran with a kiss. After a few seconds, she pulled back, but only just. In a soft but serious voice, she whispered. "Adventure Boy, I've been right here, at your side, the entire time. Kind of makes getting to know the others a bit hard."
"Sorry about that," Doran whispered back, entranced by Sannah's shimmering yellow eyes.
"Nerf brain," Sannah remarked, tilting her head slightly to kiss him again.

When they parted, she was became aware of another presence in the room, standing behind her by the bed.
"Hi, mom," Doran said, sounding much too cheerful for someone caught kissing his girlfriend, who was in a fairly compromising position as she had somehow rolled on top of him during the kiss.
"I just heard from Bardan. *Morichro,* Doran? Really?" Tyria said with a raised eyebrow, seemingly ignoring the bundle of Melodie teen in his arms.
"Errr…yeah."
"Doran, you didn't even master the ability the last time. We were both told the dangers of what would happen if it went wrong. You know better than to use a potentially fatal ability without the proper training and oversight."
"Wait a minute, so you're lecturing me on using a Force technique that *might* have killed me, and not for being captured by the Yuuzhan Vong and nearly tortured to death?" Doran said in confusion.
"The former, I can get angry about," Tyria glowered, using the Force to poke him in the shoulder. "Because it shows just how reckless you are, even with all the warnings. The latter, I would squeeze the stuffing out of you and tell you how proud and worried I am, but it looks like Sannah's taken care of that for me."
Sannah tried to melt away. "Hi Master Sarkin-Tainer…ummm…Doran's awake?"
"I can see that," Tyria said, her eyes sparkling with a happiness that hadn't been present since Doran had given himself to the Yuuzhan Vong. "And after your physical examination of him, did you find anything amiss?"
"Wasn't done examining his tonsils," Sannah mumbled, having no idea where the sudden burst of boldness came from. She called on some of that Mandalorian pride Dinua saw in her to keep herself from completely bursting into flames.
"Well then, Jedi Apprentice Sannah, I won't keep you from your examinations, then. Please inform me if you find anything wrong with him, besides his usual defects." Tyria's voice was tinged with humor as she folded her arms in front of her chest.
"Will do," Sannah muttered. She could swear that she was glowing so brightly that someone in space would be able to see her.
"Doran, I leave you to her capable hands."
Doran, who to his credit, somehow only managed to turn a pale pink, nodded. "Have I ever mentioned you were the best mom ever?"
"Of course I am," Tyria scoffed. "Now, once you feel up to it, the two of you can join us in the War Room. You really do have great timing,

Doran. The Yuuzhan Vong have left Bandomeer and were spotted regrouping in the Taris system. They'll be here shortly before the new year."

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"We have no need for the Shapers of Death," hissed a 'Caretaker,' the Yuuzhan Vong equivalent of a senator on the Freed Yuuzhan Vong Supreme Council. "Domain Rin has always been a direct pawn of the Supreme Overlord, be it Quoreal or Shimrra. They cannot be trusted."

"Were we not all, at one time, pawns of Shimrra? Some longer than others," A female warrior, one of the Caretakers from the defecting members of Domain Vang, spoke out. She glared at the former Intendant caste member who had spoken. Unlike herself, who had defected after the debacle at Obroa-Skai, he had been one of the many to defect to the Galactic Alliance after Ebaq 9. "All of us here believe that the cycle of violence—created by the abuse and manipulation of our religion by Shimrra and the priests who follow him—must end. Once Freed, however, you start with anew. The sins you participated in under Shimrra, washed away by the blessings of the Jedi who broke our shackles. If Domain Rin decides to break the trust we place on them, then that is their own doing. But we will not pass judgment if no crime has been committed. That is Shimrra's way."

"His way is what suppressed the Quorealists and kept them from infiltrating his ranks. His way is what kept the order for nearly half a century," another of the Intendant caste defectors spoke up. "How do we know that Domain Rin does not serve Shimrra even now? We have all heard the reports, how they improved upon a virus created by the Empire to kill all Yuuzhan Vong life. We all know that they have mastered Yun-Ne'shel's gift to Shape life and can do many terrible things to both our enemies and to Yuuzhan Vong alike. What's to stop their members from walking into this council room and killing us all?"

"The Caretakers of Domains Fath and Shoolb speak wisely," Zhul Yim, representing the few members of Domain Yim to defect, spoke up. "Domain Rin was once a powerful Shaping Domain for good reason. Their knowledge of life and death was unrivaled. We would be foolish to welcome them so openly without displaying at least a little caution."

Tahiri, in her Yun-Shuno outfit, took several deep calming breaths as the arguments against Domain Rin's inclusion into the Freed Yuuzhan Vong government continued on. On one hand, Tahiri was glad that the new government was working the way it should; in a peaceful, democratic, forum-like manner. On the other, it really wasn't a good sign when the new government decided to use its new found

independence to exclude other members of their race or make decisions that went against the greater good.
At least the board of five Yuuzhan Vong who led the entire council hadn't yet indicated where they stood. Composed of two former Shamed Ones, a warrior, a shaper, and an Intendant caste member, the five answered solely to the Yuuzhan Vong equivalent of a Chief of State, which was Taan. They were also the final word on any decisions that affected the Yuuzhan Vong, unless overruled by a two-thirds majority vote by the Caretakers.
"Many of you are guilty of one atrocity or another. Were good warriors, shapers, priests, Intendant caste members who blindly followed Shimrra's command. Yes, Domain Rin helped to improve the virus that killed our brothers and sisters in the Borosk system, but they are also helping the Imperial scientists find a counter for it. We are not yet so strong that we can afford to turn away the brilliant minds and ingenuity Domain Rin has to offer," another Caretaker spoke up. "If it is the will of the council, Domain Rin has the backing of Domain Shul."
"Domain Nar opposes the inclusion of Domain Rin," Domain Shul's rival in the Intendant caste spoke up immediately, proving that the Yuuzhan Vong still had a long way to go when it came to domain rivalries.
"Domain Qat welcomes what aid Domain Rin can bring to our cause."
"Domain Yim is against their inclusion unless proper safeguards are taken. We may reconsider if this council shows more caution."
And the votes continued, with the rest of the Domains' Caretakers speaking out for or against Domain Rin's inclusion into the Freed Yuuzhan Vong Supreme Council. Since each Domain was represented by two Caretakers, some votes were split, representing the clear conflict Domain Rin presented.
Once all the Domains had spoken, all eyes turned towards the board of five Yuuzhan Vong, the Blessed of the Yun-Jeedai. The five, in turn, turned to Taan. "We would like to know what the Supreme Leader has to say about this," the Intendant caste on the board said aloud.
Taan briefly tilted her head. "Reveal your votes first, *then* I shall speak my mind."
Decades of being ordered about, of being told what to do and having the important decisions made for them, had left the Yuuzhan Vong still slightly uncertain as to how to go about governing themselves. Even then, Tahiri had to silently applaud Taan for avoiding any rubber-stamping that might have occurred once the others had heard her opinion.

The Yun-Jeedai appeared nervous at first, but then they too revealed their votes. Not surprisingly, even the Yun-Jeedai were conflicted, with three voting for the inclusion of Domain Rin, and the others against it.
Taan very calmly took the floor. "Both arguments have much logic. We have come this far by trusting the intentions of those who join us. Trusting without question. We have, of course, uncovered agents of Shimrra operating in our midst before, but we did not punish the entire Domain for the actions of a few. Conversely, those agents managed to take many lives before they were stopped, some were dear friends to us. If we give Domain Rin a probationary status, allowed them to attend our meetings, but not the right to vote in them, will any of the Domains who voted against them be more open to their inclusion then?"
There were several who nodded in agreement, including one of the members of the Yun-Jeedai board.
"Then this is what I propose. We limit Domain Rin to one Caretaker, chosen by the Yun-Jeedai, until such time Domain Rin has proven itself a true friend to the Freed Yuuzhan Vong or until the war is over, whichever comes first. Until that time, Domain Rin's Caretaker will not have voting powers, but will still be able to keep his or her Domain informed about any decisions made in this council chambers. If there are any further concerns, speak them now."
The room was silent.
"Then let it be done with Yun-Shuno's blessing," Taan inclined her head to Tahiri, who stepped forward with the small delegation of Domain Rin Shapers.
"I, Tahiri Kwaad, the One-Who-Was-Shaped, Jedi Knight, Daughter of the Desert, and avatar of Yun-Shuno, approve of this decision and the wise judgment of this council. I hereby absolve Domain Rin of any crimes they have incurred while being led astray by Shimrra the Deceiver, and wish that they be fully integrated into the Supreme Council as soon as possible," Tahiri said in Yuuzhan Vong. "May the Supreme Leader and the Caretakers always lead with such wisdom and thought."
There were several other procedural processes to go through, but for the most part, Domain Rin was now officially a part of the new government. The council meeting was over, and the Caretakers began to depart. As the delegation from the pariah Shaping Domain began speaking with others, Tahiri approached an exhausted looking Taan. The first leader of the Freed Yuuzhan Vong looked a lot worse for wear than Tahiri could ever remember. "Taan?"

Hearing the concern in Tahiri's voice, the former Shamed One smiled bravely. "One-Who-Was-Shaped."
"You doing alright?" Tahiri placed a hand over one of Taan's.
The Freed One, who was only a year older than Jaina, sighed, sagged in her seat, and rubbed at her eyes, exhaustion clear on her face. "I have seen better days. Now that they have their freedom, all the domains seem to want to do is go off in their own direction. Each domain wants *their* domain to be the most prominent in the council, wants *their* needs and agenda addressed first. The shapers want to Shape, the warriors want to warmonger, the Intendant caste still want to scheme, and the priests are trying to regain the power they lost once we replaced them with the Jedi. And considering the fact that some domains are now in part serving Shimrra and part free, those domains want to make freeing the rest a top priority. The virus and Domain Rin's inclusion hasn't made anything easier. It is all I can do to keep everyone together."
"But it appears you are doing a good job," Tahiri said softly.
"Leia Solo has been coaching me on how to be a politician, on what to expect," Taan explained wearily. "Her knowledge of building the Rebellion into the New Republic is very similar to what the Freed Yuuzhan Vong are trying to do now. I am quite sure that if it were not for her lessons, you would be speaking to a different Supreme Leader."
"Hopefully things will be easier once Anakin and the others return with the support of Zonama Sekot."
"I cannot pray enough to have them return as soon as possible," Taan breathed with a weak laugh. "A good portion of the non-Shamed defectors are Quorealists and the Quorealist movement only grows as the days go by; fed by Shimrra's declining power and the heretic supporters of the Jedi."
"'Quorealists?'"
"So named because they still support the previous Supreme Overlord and see Shimrra as a usurper. They also believe as Quoreal did, that Zonama Sekot would spell the end for the Yuuzhan Vong people. They are emerging to be one of the more powerful political factions in the Supreme Council, more so now that they are led by former High Prefect Drathul."
"You managed to get a High Prefect to defect?" Tahiri's eyebrows shot up. A High Prefect defecting would be like getting an Imperial Moff to switch sides. The High Prefect had power, position, and territory, and defecting would take all that away.
"He is new to the council and still thinks that his rank under Shimrra holds power," Taan scowled, obviously not impressed by her

movement's success. "He defected after Domain Choka lost Hutt Space. The Yuuzhan Vong still appreciate a strong leader over a wise one. And Drathul has made no effort to disguise his desire for my position."
"Is there anything I can do? I can speak out against him if you want," Tahiri offered.
But Taan shook her head. "I would not be much of a strong leader if I had to have Jedi speaking for me. At the moment, Drathul is manageable. As a high ranking member of Shimrra's government, most of the Freed Ones are still cautious about giving him any sort of power. He is a favorite only among the Intendant caste and priestly defectors, which, at the moment, are not that great in number. Only the power he wields within the Quorealist movement poses any sort of threat. He commands twenty of the seventy possible votes among the Caretakers. His power all depends on what happens when Zonama Sekot is discovered."
"And are your people ready for it? For the end of the war?" Tahiri said softly, taking a seat next to Taan in one of the vacant Yun-Jeedai chairs.
"We are doing what we can," Taan shrugged. "Of course, it would help if the other fifteen Domains who still fully side with Shimrra, also join our movement. To present a unified front that represents all of the Domains would be ideal."
"You have most of them, that's a start."
"It is, and despite my complaints, it is not all bad." Taan rolled her head to ease up her tense neck muscles. Wryly, she looked over to Tahiri. "If you are ever in need for a laugh, come to one of the agricultural lessons designed for the warriors. Give them an amphistaff and they're full of bluster and confidence. Give them a shovel and a plant and the expressions on their faces are most amusing. After the third lesson, when one of the Freed Ones came in with a full beanstalk —as opposed to their tiny sprouts—well, I don't think I've ever seen warriors so determined to grow plants before."
Tahiri emitted a small laugh at the image it conjured; big, hulking, scarred and muscular warriors tending to tiny green sprigs with the same vigor that had once been used to wage war. "I'll definitely stop by next time."
"Several of the priest have also learned that plants need more than just prayers to Yun-Ne'Shel to survive," Taan chuckled to herself. "The shapers have been helpful as well, working covertly with your government to repair some of the damage our terraforming has done

to a couple of the planets. Though we are still fighting a war, we are doing our best to prepare for what will come after."

){ V I}( ){ VI }(

"Come and gather around! I am the Prophet. I speak the truth and foretell what is to come. I am not myself the key to redemption—I merely seek it."

Gatherings of Shamed Ones and Freed Ones filled the sprawling grotto where the illegal meeting was taking place, all present to hear the wise words being preached by the Prophet Yu'shaa. It was a common occurrence in the hidden enclaves of the lower levels of Coruscant, with more joining the meeting with every setback suffered by Shimrra. No longer content to just sit idly by while the madman drove their race to extinction, the more charismatic underground leaders, such as Yu'shaa, were quick to gain the support of the oppressed and abused masses. And there were plenty of places in the understreets of Coruscant for the disgruntled and disillusioned among the Yuuzhan Vong to hide and scheme.

"There is a great evil in this galaxy! He has no name, but his eyes are like rainbows, glittering and inviting, yet his body is that of a stormcloud, his voice thundering and wrath great. As strong as he is, a day will come when the ground will reach up towards the sky and drag him back down. Where the mountains will slice through the clouds like a coufee in the heart of a Quednak. Rain shall be released onto the parched earth—the heartblood of the great, mqaaq'it-eyed evil. And from his death, new life shall spring, and out people shall be great once more!"

"And when will this occur?" A voice entreated from the back of the massive crowd.

"In time, in time," the robe-swathed Prophet held out his gnarled hands. "Mountains need time to grow, the soil needs time to rise. But there will come a day when the skies will darken and death will sweep across this land. We will all gaze up into the sky and see our past reflected, our minds and souls returning to where we began as the end draws nigh! This is just one of many visions that the gods have blessed me with, and I will share more as that time grows nearer. Just know that your continued faith will be rewarded with redemption, and we shall all be Shamed no more on that day of reckoning. Instead, the others will look upon us and praise us for our pious devotion. We shall not only be freed, but we will be the Extolled! Walking with our heads held high, yet humbled by the tests our gods had put to us."

"But the teachings of Taan and the Supreme Council say that we are all equal! That there is no difference between Shamed and warrior or shaper."
"Of course Taan and the Supreme Council will say that. They speak from the comfort and safety of the infidel capital," Yu'shaa scoffed. "They could care less about the continued toils and dangers all of you have to deal with. While they sit well fed and happy, we all slave away. Sweat. Bleed. It is clear that the Shamed are in fact the strongest of the Yuuzhan Vong. Can you imagine the warriors or shapers enduring the labors we deal with on a daily basis? We are the true chosen of the gods, and soon, redemption shall be upon us."
The meeting went on, with the Prophet rising the hopes of the gathered crowd with every well-chosen word.
At the end, as everyone began to disburse, several of the Prophet's bodyguards approached him.
"Yu'shaa," they bowed their heads. "You have gained another follower. He wishes to meet with you."
"Is that so?"
"Yes." Yu'shaa's servants stepped aside.
The Prophet was obvious in his attempts to hide his surprise as he gazed upon the person behind them. "You!"
"Prophet." Naazar, former High Priest of Yun-Yammka, inclined his head and stepped forward. Mistaking the Prophet's shock for fear, he quickly moved to assuage the heretic leader's concern. "You have no need to fear me. I am here to learn more about these visions of yours, and of the *Jeedai*."
){ VII}( ){VII }(
After spending an entire day politicking, her morning occupied by the Yuuzhan Vong Supreme Council, her afternoon with the High Council, and the evening filled with the Galactic Alliance Senate, Tahiri couldn't be happier if she never saw another politician, Yuuzhan Vong or otherwise, ever again. Now that the Supreme Council had begun coordinating Freed Yuuzhan Vong fleet movements, and its numbers growing, a majority of the Galactic Alliance senators had become aware of its establishment and not all of their reactions had been positive.
The High Council hadn't been as nearly as friendly as before, and it was clear when she walked into the room that something had fractured the normally tight-knit alliance between Jedi and politician. That 'something' was made evident when, instead of wanting a debriefing of what had occurred in Imperial space, they immediately began questioning her about Anakin, Alema, and their actions. The questions

were all over the place and completely absurd from her stand-point. Anakin a Sith Master? Alema his apprentice? How long had she known that Anakin could use the dark side of the Force? Would she recommend he be detained upon his return? Already missing him fiercely, it was all Tahiri could do to keep from exploding in disbelief and anger. Only months before, the High Council had been so eager to follow Anakin's plans. Only months before Anakin had been a hero. And now they were treating him as some kind of criminal?

When members of the Death Knights were brought in to testify to their version of the events on Kalee, Tahiri had nearly stormed out at the ridiculousness of it all. The politicians had evidently been affected by a sudden wave of anti-Anakin reports from the media—as reported to them by Pali'va Konat—where they were called Anakin's stooges, or lackeys. Even the normally Jedi-friendly senators on the Council had to tread carefully.

The Jedi on the council had likewise been forced to play it conservatively. Any lingering support Anakin might have had evaporated, however, when the Death Knights played a recording passed onto them by Vergere. It was of Alema speaking of her role in the assault on the Alpha Red facility, and all but admitting that she had killed everyone there.

"I find it hard to believe, that as close as Anakin was to Alema Rar, he was unaware of this. What do the Jedi have to say?" Justice Minister Ta'laam Ranth pointed out.

"I'll admit that it looks suspicious," Kenth Hamner said neutrally. "Jedi Kwaad, were you aware of Alema's role in the burning of the science facility and murder of its staff?"

Tahiri had swallowed nervously under the eyes of the Masters and high ranking Knights, she couldn't hope to lie and get away with it. Sending a mental apology to Alema, Tahiri nodded very reluctantly. "On Kalee, Alema admitted to me what you heard in that recording."

Of course the senators on the council immediately jumped on this. "And you did not think to warn anyone about this? Perhaps, had she been detained, we would not have lost five valuable Jedi on that planet."

Needless to say, the rest of the meeting was agonizingly painful, and the High Council stopped short of issuing an arrest warrant for Anakin. But even that decision had widened the growing rift between the politicians and the Jedi on the council. The Jedi had been staunchly against any form of imprisonment or punishment until Anakin could speak to defend himself. The politicians were being pressured by both

the public and their fellow senators to show that they were not the lapdogs for the Jedi that the media made them out to be.
The fact that Anakin Solo was the grandson of a Sith Lord who had wreaked havoc and terror across the galaxy was brought up and sparked a new round of arguments. In the end, it was agreed that any judgment would be withheld until Anakin could speak for himself. Tahiri was then explicitly warned that if she hid any more evidence from the council, saw Anakin using dark side powers and wouldn't report it, she too would share in his punishment.
She had of course been in a very foul mood after that, but unfortunately had yet another meeting to attend; this time with various committees from the Galactic Alliance Senate.
And it hadn't been any more pleasant than her first two brushes with the political realm. Tahiri would rather hug a Hutt, than endure a six hour grilling by different senatorial committees, all of whom were either woefully ignorant about Yuuzhan Vong culture, or just plain vindictive. This of course led her to explain various aspects in detail; even as other senators spent most of the entire time making thinly veiled insinuations about her loyalty and judgment. She hadn't been alone. Danni Quee had also endured the endless questions and accusations right along with her.
Fortunately, they managed to get through all the meetings without strangling anyone. Unfortunately, the questions and proposals the Senate had put forward went to show just how little they still understood the Yuuzhan Vong culture and society.
Some of the suggestions involved disbanding the domains and caste systems to create a Galactic Alliance-style government for the Yuuzhan Vong once Zonama Sekot has been found. Apart from the fact that it was nearly impossible to successfully transplant a form of government completely alien to the people it was being transplanted onto—not to mention incompatible with the religious and social systems of their entire race—the senators who had proposed the idea seemed to think that all they needed to do was lay the groundwork and expect everything to work out for the better. Similarly, the likeminded senators seemed to think that by completely disbanding the warrior caste and forcing all those warriors into civilian life, they would prevent the Yuuzhan Vong from ever being a threat in the future. Both Danni and Tahiri had exchanged ever suffering glances at this idea, and told the panel very clearly, that the plan would never work—although the words they used were slightly more diplomatic than the words that had been on the tips of their tongues.

This then led to another round of sly implications about their loyalties and dedication to galactic peace.
And it was why they were glad that the inquisition was finally over.
"Isn't it sad how they're willing to accept the Freed Yuuzhan Vong as allies, but aren't willing to learn a thing about their culture beyond the intelligence briefs they are given?" Danni exhaled, as they exited the senate building and inhaled the sea-salt filled air for the first time in several hours.
"Isn't sad how we've only developed an appreciation for the Yuuzhan Vong after being captured and tortured by them?" Tahiri remarked wryly.
"I don't think the senators would appreciate a similar session if that's what you're thinking," Danni said with a tired laugh.
"Drat," Tahiri sighed.
"And to think I passed up an opportunity to find Zonama Sekot for politics and science," Danni echoed Tahiri's resigned sigh. Being the Director of the Allied Science Divisions wasn't exactly as glorious as it sounded. Ideologically and morally unique, the Remnant scientists, Galactic Alliance scientist, Freed One Shapers, and the techs from the Smuggler's Alliance, all strained Danni's mind to their limits. And that was just trying to get them to work together. Working with the different political factions also meant that she not only had to answer to the Galactic Alliance politicians, but the Imperial Moffs, and the Supreme Council Shaper Domains' Caretakers.
"I hate being one of the responsible ones," Tahiri empathized.
"You have time for a bite? Maybe we can go check on the *Veila* afterwards."
Tahiri brightened, a trip to the *Veila* always made her feel better. The ship was definitely growing and learning at a rapid rate. "Sure thing."
"There's an eatery nearby the hangar," Danni gestured with her head. "We can go there."
Unfortunately, the day, as late as it was, didn't seem to be done with either of them yet.
Exiting out of the political sector of the floating city, Tahiri and Danni both noticed the small crowd gradually moving to surround them.
"Think *they're* friendly?" Danni muttered.
"The Dug to the right of us wants to skin us alive for being 'scarhead lovers,'" Tahiri said mildly, reading the bipedal creature's mind. "He's very angry."
"I got that from the 'skin us alive part.'"
The mob continued to close in around them, gradually, subtly.

"I am getting *very* tired of this," Tahiri finally hissed, reigning in her darker emotions. After having spent the past six hours defending the Yuuzhan Vong and her relationship to them, Tahiri had had enough of the close-minded nature of the very people she was trying to protect.
"Tahiri, don't. They're just scared, frustrated," Danni whispered.
"Enough is enough, Danni," Tahiri muttered, one of her hands curling into a fist. "I am sick and tired of the Freed One's good intentions, of my friends being doubted and questioned, of all the hate, of people staring at the scars on my forehead like I'm some sort of alien."
"They're not worth it," Danni glanced at the younger teen.
"If I don't say anything, who will?" Tahiri hissed, sensing the thoughts of the mob with growing anger. Though she and Danni had picked up their pace through the warehouse district, so had the mob. "Our own government would rather the Yuuzhan Vong all burn, no matter what the Freed Ones do. Most of the Jedi only want peace because it will stop the war. They couldn't care less what will happen to the Yuuzhan Vong. And Omega Blue? Taan's people know for a fact that both the Galactic Alliance and Imperials have secreted stockpiles of it away for emergencies."
"Stockpiles meant to be used to develop a counter," Danni said.
"You really think that's all the stockpiles will be used for?" Tahiri said through clenched teeth. "The Yuuzhan Vong are never going to have a place in this galaxy, as hard as they're trying. If the plan with Zonama Sekot doesn't work out, what do you think will happen?"
Several members of the mob began calling out to them.
"Get off this planet, Vong-lover."
"*Did you actually think you could support those scarheads and word wouldn't get out?"*
"*How could you two support them after everything they've done?"*
"The scarheads are better off dead."
"They wiped out my people, it's only fair we wipe them out too!"
"Ignore them," Danni placed a staying hand on Tahiri's forearm as the younger blond visibly trembled with anger.
"You didn't answer my question," Tahiri breathed. "If I don't speak up for them, who will?'
A piece of duracrete was suddenly launched into the air at them, and Tahiri whirled around, holding out a hand and catching the chunk in mid-air. With a trembling fist, she slowly lowered the block to the ground.
"*If you support the Vong, you'll die along with them*!"
Several more chunks, thrown by different people, flew through the air. Tahiri used a wave of Force energy to knock them all aside.

"Enough," Tahiri snarled, activating her lightsaber. The sapphire blade pierced the night's shadows and momentarily halted the advance of the mob; the hum of the blade and the heavy breathing of the various species around her the only sounds that could be heard. "Not all Yuuzhan Vong are alike. Just like not all Dug, or human, or Twi'lek, or Rodian, are alike. Don't blame the entire race for the actions of a few."
"Few? They came here! Their entire race! Came here to attack this galaxy!" Someone in the mob yelled.
"And if you were forced to go somewhere at blaster point, to kill complete strangers or die a torturous death, which would *you* choose?" Danni spoke up.
"Then they're cowards! Because they followed their orders, my entire planet lies in ruins!"
"My own is poisoned beyond repair!"
"They massacred billions of my people!"
The mob began to close in again.
A yellow blade of light suddenly emerged from the back of the crowd. "Hi, is this a private party?" A male voice called out from the vicinity of the blade.
The sight of a second lightsaber stilled the bereaved mob once more.
"Who the shab are you?" One of the mob members turned towards the newcomer.
"Uldir Lochet, Galactic Alliance rescue pilot, at your service." Tahiri's eyes widened in recognition. "Now, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask all you fine, upstanding citizens, to vacate the premises immediately."
"Or what?" One of the mob members pulled out a blaster.
"Or my companion here will be less nice when she asks. But she's a lot more convincing."
Eyes darted to the yellow-lightsaber wielding figure, a dark-haired young woman only a few weeks shy of twenty. She was on the smaller side, and didn't look all that imposing in the yellow outfit she wore. Despite the fact that she had a lightsaber, the mob seemed confident in their numbers.
They began to approach Uldir and Klin-Fa.
Klin-Fa waved her free hand. "All of you will go home and sleep this off." The Force was very strong in her words, and in the blink of an eye, the crowd dispersed.
"Uldir!" Tahiri exclaimed, feeling her frustration bleed away at seeing one of her friends from her childhood days.
"Errr…hello?" Uldir tilted his head, staring in confusion at the fairly attractive young blond woman practically bursting with excitement.
Tahiri blinked and gestured to herself. "Uldir? It's me, Tahiri."

Uldir's eyes bulged and he looked her over again. "Tahiri? Force, you've grown."
"I would hope so. It *has* been almost seven years since you last saw me," Tahiri grinned, leaping slightly to hug him.
Klin-Fa cleared her throat. "Introductions, Uldir?"
"Klin-Fa, this is Tahiri. She's the one of the ones I told you about when I attended Master Skywalker's academy. Tahiri, this is my girlfriend, Klin-Fa."
"Girlfriend?" Tahiri smiled broadly, then turned to Klin-Fa. "Tahiri, Tahiri Kwaad. Nice to see Uldir found someone. Oh, and my friend here is Danni Quee, she's a scientist."
"Nice to meet you," Danni politely shook Uldir's hand.
Klin-Fa's extended hand seemed to freeze as Tahiri gripped it. "Isn't 'Kwaad' a Vong shaper name?"
"It is," Tahiri said slowly.
"Oh boy," Danni groaned, recognizing the way Tahiri's jaw was clenched.
"Not good?" Uldir breathed, watching as Tahiri and Klin-Fa stared each other down.
"More like bad timing," Danni clarified.
"Run for cover?"
"Too late."
"So, the Vong Shaped you?" Klin-Fa said, her mental barriers slamming shut and her body taking on a defensive posture. Her black eyes flicked up to Tahiri's scars. "I guess that explains the name and the scars."
"Is that going to be a problem?" Tahiri said coolly. Neither had relinquished the other's hand, and their grips seemed to grow ever tighter as they continued to exchanged words.
"I just have a problem with anyone who thinks embracing pain and having Vong friends is a good thing. Is *that* going to be a problem?"
"I just have a problem with close-minded, thick-headed, ignorant bigots."
"This is going soooo well," Uldir cut in, stepping between two nearly identical glares-of-death. "I'm glad that one of my oldest friends and my girlfriend can get along."
His move ended up making him the target of both glares.
"Don't interfere!"
"Stay out of it!"
A brief motion, and Uldir was sent staggering backwards by a small buffet of Force-created wind.

Uldir glanced at Danni in exasperation. "You ever have one of those moments where you think something is a good idea, but then when you go to implement it, you wonder why you ever thought of something that turned out so bad?"
"Many times," Danni winced at the subtle, 'I'm-going-to-enjoy-killing-you,' waves of Force energy streaming off their partners. "Guessing and being wrong is part of my trade."
Lightsabers were reactivated, and Danni and Uldir groaned.
"Why in the world does Klin-Fa provoke that I-want-to-kill-you-at-first-sight, reaction?" Uldir muttered incredulously. "First the Vong, then my crew, and now Tahiri. She's like that girlfriend everyone but you hates, making you question your own sanity."
"Under normal circumstances, Tahiri's actually quite understanding," Danni said reassuringly. "Five hours defending her boyfriend in front of the High Council, and another six hours in the Senate, drained it out of her though."
"At times like this, I wish I could use the Force to head these types of things off," Uldir sighed.
"Aren't you a Jedi too?" Danni glanced at Uldir.
"Force-aware only. Not strong enough to be a user."
"Me too," Danni said with a weak smile. "Glad I'm not the only one. Can you at least talk your partner down?"
"On any other day, maybe. But Klin-Fa's been getting pretty frustrated during our little stay on Mon Cal. We spent all of yesterday, and the entire morning, with several senatorial committees trying to convince them to send more aid to the Outer Rim. The most we got were vague promises that we knew were said just to get us out of the room. How about you? Think you can talk Tahiri down?"
"Are you kidding me?" Danni said, wincing at the distinctive sound of two lightsabers clashing. "She'd only ever really listen to Anakin, and she's pretty much had a day like yours, filled with politicians."
"There *has* to be a healthier way to blow off steam," Uldir watched as the blue and yellow sabers sliced through the air in a flurry of twists and slices. "Oh, and speaking of Anakin, where is he? I thought he and Tahiri were inseparable."
"They normally are," Danni nodded, jerking her head to the side as a Force-thrown pipe whizzed by them like a missile and embedded itself into a distant wall. "But he's currently looking for Zonama Sekot; a sentient planet that might be the origin of the Yuuzhan Vong and a key to ending the war. Tahiri had to return to handle the growing Supreme Council."

Uldir inhaled sharply as Tahiri's blade nearly decapitated his girlfriend. "So the Supreme Council isn't just a rumor then."
"No, Cal Omas put them together in an effort to control the defecting Yuuzhan Vong, and so the Yuuzhan Vong would have a stable government once the Supreme Overlord is defeated."
"Seems to make sense," Uldir agreed. "Can't imagine it being too popular at the moment, though."
"Hence…" Danni gestured towards Tahiri, who had just executed a two-handed, aggressive, downward strike against Klin-Fa's saber.
"I heard about how Tahiri had been captured by the Yuuzhan Vong," Uldir said softly, seeing her scars glow in the blue light of her blade. "Is she…?"
"She's herself, just slightly different," Danni answered. "From what I can understand, Anakin helped pull her through, and Jaina and Jacen helped Tahiri reconcile the Yuuzhan Vong personality that had been implanted within her with her human self."
"I really hate shapers," Uldir muttered.
"And Klin-Fa? Her fear of the Yuuzhan Vong seems to go beyond the normal reaction."
"She and two of her closest friends were Yuuzhan Vong prisoners once," Uldir answered. "She was the only one to survive."
"Oh."
"Yeah. It probably doesn't help that one of those two was her first boyfriend, and that he had been tortured to death by shapers from Domain Kwaad."
"Oh." Danni said again, the same word taking on a whole other meaning. They both glanced towards the two lightsaber-wielding Jedi, flinching as sparks flew off the impact of the blue and yellow blades.
"There's also something about not being able to feel the Yuuzhan Vong in the Force that unnerves her," Uldir said. "She doesn't like not being able to se…"
Being Force-aware meant that the two could sense changes in the Force around them. And the sudden change was enough to redirect their attention to Tahiri. The blond teen had dropped out of the regular spectrum of the Force, practically becoming invisible.
"Vongphase," Danni muttered.
"For Yabeley!" Klin-Fa snarled, suddenly charging Tahiri with an expression of hate on her face.
"Danni, explain quickly. I don't like having an old friend suddenly read 'Vong' in the Force."
"Sorry. Vongphase is something Anakin Solo and Alema Rar developed. It involves dropping out of the regular Force and mimicking the voids

left by a Yuuzhan Vong, essentially becoming just like a Yuuzhan Vong in the Force. They can detect Yuuzhan Vong much better in that phase then with the normal Vongsense."
"Wait a minute, I thought Jedi couldn't detect Yuuzhan Vong." Uldir was breathing heavily as the combat between the two younger women reached a fever pitch. Motions so fast his eyes could barely keep up.
"Anakin, Jacen, Alema, and Tahiri can," Danni shrugged, equally transfixed. "Don't ask me how. They explained the theory, but without actually being able to use the Force, I can't describe it. Something about tapping into the Yuuzhan Vong life bonded to them to see the galaxy through its eyes. I'm a scientist, not a Jedi after all."
"Right, scientist." The clashes fiercer, the blows body-shaking, yet neither combatant appeared to be tiring. "Any interesting project's you're working on at the moment?"
"At the moment?" Danni glanced at Uldir and began to count off with her fingers. "Coordinating a joint team of scientist from around the galaxy to create a counter of a Yuuzhan Vong killing virus created by the Empire. Overseeing an experimental trial of a drug that might neutralize a slaveseed embedded within a Yuuzhan Vong slave, without harming the slave. Leading a team of scientists and soldiers to weaponize bafforr pollen so that we can neutralize the blaster and lightsaber resistant vonduun crab armor worn by the Yuuzhan Vong warriors. Oh, and I'm also the chief researcher in finding ways to combine Yuuzhan Vong biots with our tech."
Uldir blinked. "And you have time to eat, sleep, and relax, when?"
"After the war is over, I guess," Danni shrugged. "It's not that bad. After the first few weeks, your body gets used to twenty hour shifts. A lot is riding on our research. More so if Zonama Sekot doesn't want to help out."
"That's why I'm just a pilot. Much easier to just be pointed in one direction and told to do something remotely achievable," Uldir said with an amused laugh as he marveled at what the scientist was pulling off.
"How about you? You said you were a rescue pilot, and that you were trying to gain support for the Outer Rim systems, but what else have you been doing?"
"Oh, working for the Jedi Order in one way or another," Uldir said dismissively. "One of the systems we're helping out is the Mandalore system. They're due for a major invasion, so I was looking for recruits to help out."

"You mind if I tag along?" Danni asked. "I would definitely appreciate a chance to try out some of the tricks my people have created. I'm sure Tahiri would want to join as well."
They glanced at the combative Jedi, and saw that the fight had more or less ended. Both Klin-Fa and Tahiri were panting and whispering back and forth heatedly. They were covered in minor burns and small cuts, but nothing serious. The important thing, though, was that they had sheathed their lightsabers and seemed less homicidal than when they had started.
Uldir used his limited Force abilities to tug on the bond he had with Klin-Fa to see what she was feeling. Since she had become his girlfriend, Uldir had found that he was able to access the Force much easier than before. He could also definitely feel her emotions through the bond that had formed between them. Whether he was simply leeching off of her own Force abilities, or if the bond helped his own potential develop, he didn't know.
His check up on her revealed that Klin-Fa was currently confused, hopefully, and a whole other myriad of emotions that Uldir sometimes sensed when she thought about her first love.
"Have a good fight?" He asked, when they made their way back.
Klin-Fa nodded, wiping the beads of sweat off her forehead. "We definitely needed it. Your old friend's going to teach me how to sense Vong."
"She can do that?" Uldir looked to Tahiri in surprise.
"She has the potential," Tahiri nodded. "She's a lot like another one of my friends, Alema. One of the vital aspects of sensing Yuuzhan Vong is a strong fear, hate, or understanding of them."
"That's definitely me," Klin-Fa inputted, leaning into Uldir.
"The other vital aspect is that you would have had to bond with some form of Yuuzhan Vong life, willingly or not."
"Again me," Klin-Fa pulled back her dark hair to reveal a scar that ran along her scalp; one of the 'gifts' her shapers had given her when she had been captured.
Uldir simply nodded in understanding. The shapers may have tortured Yabeley to death, but they had also left Klin-Fa with more than just a few scars and a couple of traumatic memories. At the time she had been captured, it had still been fairly early on in the war, and there had been a tremendous pressure on the Shaper caste to discover how a Jedi's powers worked. Though Klin-Fa had at first been reluctant to tell Uldir about what had occurred. As their relationship grew stronger, she eventually revealed to him that she was capable of understanding the Yuuzhan Vong language, and even thinking in it, if she tried. It was

how she knew how the Vong-tech and their ships worked. But she never truly liked that part of herself, so she had always kept it repressed.
"With those two aspects, I think I can definitely teach Klin-Fa how to sense Yuuzhan Vong," Tahiri concluded.
"That's great," Danni smiled. "Then it seems like you're definitely going to be coming with me on their mission."
"Mission?" Tahiri arched an eyebrow.
"It's just another run-of-the-mill stop-a-Yuuzhan Vong-fleet-from-blasting-a-planet-into-dust mission," Danni shrugged.
"Danni," Tahiri said dryly. "You've been hanging around me and the other Solos a bit too much."
"Don't worry, I think you'll like it," Uldir smiled at the younger blond. "Sannah and Doran are already on Mandalore, and I bet they'll be more than happy to see you again."
"Mandalore?" Tahiri glanced at Uldir. "Maybe…you better tell me just what my good friend Danni has gotten me into."
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Doran couldn't decide whether having a girlfriend that could now kick his butt was a good thing. Sure he had gone through the basic training for the Mandalorian Protectors, but that was almost three years ago. Since then, there hadn't really been any call to make use of the lessons he had learned, and he had gotten rusty. Sannah, on the other hand, had only recently received Dinua's seal of approval and was personally trained by one of *Manda'lor*'s *Ori'ramikade*.
Yes, she could definitely kick his butt now, Doran though, watching Sannah drop two members of Clan Skirata to the ground in hand-to-hand training. The Melodie teen helped them up and then went on to explain how she had gotten past their defenses.
"That's one heck of a partner you got there," Dinua said, taking a seat next to him.
"Yeah," Doran smiled softly. "That she is."
"And here I was, worried about what would happen to you once you left Gargon without someone watching your back."
"Worried? You do care."
"*Di'kut*," Dinua lightly shoved him. "How Sannah and I put up with you is a complete mystery."
"You have a great partner yourself," Doran gestured with his head towards Jintar, who was likewise helping Clan Skirata prepare for the coming battle.
"Yeah, he's become quite the Mandalorian. As good as you," Dinua said, a whimsical smile flickering across her face.

"He's definitely better."
"I didn't want to hurt your soft Jedi feelings."
"Speaking of feelings. You know about his feelings for you, don't you?"
"Yeah."
"Well?"
"Maybe…after the war is over…we'll see."
"*After* the war is over?"
"No sense starting something and getting the other heartbroken if something happened," Dinua shrugged. "Sure Jintar would be a welcomed distraction, but you know how us Mandalorians work; ease makes decay and all."
"You're using duty as an excuse," Doran said, draping an arm around her. He was probably one of the few males allowed to casually do so. "Come on, Dinua. You're not supposed to be the dim one in our, well, whatever we have between us."
"I know," Dinua sighed as she continued to watch Jintar. "But killing, fighting, war, those I can understand…It's the mushy soft stuff that you Jedi are so good at that confuses me. I'm sure if my mom was still around…she'd, I don't know, say something. The last thing I'm going to do is talk to my fathers about this. I prefer having Jintar in one piece."
"Fair enough. How about instead you let me tell you something my dad told me when I was talking to him about Sannah," Doran said mildly, his own eyes pinned on the new and improved, athletically-fit form of his girlfriend. "He made it fairly simple. So if thick headed gundark like me can understand it, I think even a dim soldier like you can get it."
"Even if the doctors say you have to take it easy, don't think I won't pummel you to death," Dinua drawled, leaning against him nonetheless.
"Dad basically told me this, 'If Sannah dies tomorrow, and you never told her how you felt, how would you feel then? Even if she goes through her metamorphoses when she reaches twenty and you go your separate ways, that's still six years away. Would you rather spend those six years alone, or with her at your side? Don't put off happiness because of what *might* happen. That's the biggest mistake you can ever make. Treasure what you do have, because there are no second chances in life. Once you lose someone, they're gone.' Of course, it still took me several months to work up the courage to tell Sannah how I felt about her, but you get the idea."
"Idiot," Dinua laughed softly, reaching up to affectionately squeeze his hand. "But you're right, even a dumb grunt like me could get that message."
"And?"

"And," Dinua unlooped his arm from around her. "Unlike you, this dumb grunt doesn't need several months of preparation. I'm a Mandalorian, we jump into hell head first."
"That's the spirit."
"Doran."
Doran turned towards her. She leaned forward and planted a soft, loving, but chaste kiss on his lips.
"Thank you, for everything," Dinua whispered, stepping back. "You were the best first partner I could have asked for."
"Go get your man, Dinua Jeban," Doran smiled, his eyes glittering with happiness.
"As you command, *ner or'vod,*" Dinua whispered, taking another step away before looking back over her shoulder. "And if we survive this, and things work out between he and myself, we'll be sure to have a wedding before your girlfriend becomes a fish."
"Sannah would like that," Doran laughed softly. "Now go."
Dinua flashed him a very un-Dinua-like smile, bright and full of happiness, as she nodded, turned away, and broke out into a light jog over to where Jintar was. In the meantime, Sannah took her place at his side, a mischievous grin on her face. "So, matchmaker huh? Is this also one of the things you do?"
"On my free time." Doran chuckled at what he was watching.
Dinua had walked right up to Jintar—who had been lecturing some of the younger members of Clan Skirata on what to look for when fighting the Yuuzhan Vong—grabbed his head, and gave him a full on, deep, passionate kiss in front of everyone. Jintar had obviously been surprised at first, but then got into the spirit of things and returned the kiss just as passionately.
Tyria, who had been co-teaching the lesson, blinked at the two Mandalorian teens, then cast her gaze over to where her son and Sannah was, arching a fine, blond eyebrow. The Jedi teens were watching the spectacle with as much amusement as she herself was feeling. With a bemused shake of her head, Tyria floated Dinua and Jeban off to the side, neither Mandalorian breaking off the kiss or even realizing they had been relocated.
"Well then," Tyria resumed the lesson with a smile. "One last thing you have to look out for is that some of the warriors have bony spikes embedded into their hands, elbows, you name it. Even if you disarm them, they can use their entire body to attack, so don't get too close."
Purely out of curiosity, one of the younger Mandalorians picked up a small rock and threw it at the new couple. In the blink of an eye, Dinua

had drawn her blaster pistol, obliterated the rock in mid-air, and holstered the weapon, all without breaking the kiss.
The sound of the blaster firing, however, seemed to kill the mood as much as it did the rock, and Jintar and Dinua finally came up for air a few seconds later. Soft words were whispered, before Dinua clasped Jintar's arm briefly, and the two parted ways.
"Yuuzhan Vong armor is strongest at the chest and legs. To combat them, sonic disrupters, shatter guns, or head shots, work better than the standard blaster," Jintar said, resuming the lecture as if nothing had happened. "Of course the usual rockets and detonators will leave a mess, but you'll want to save those for the larger targets."
In the meantime, Dinua had taken over Sannah's position training the younger members of Clan Skirata in hand-to-hand combat.
"We are definitely going to make sure they survive the Vong attack," Sannah whispered determinedly.
Doran nodded and laced his fingers with hers. "Let's just make sure *we* survive the attack too."
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A\N: So on Wednesday we begin Book 3 of the Heretic trilogy and we learn that Doran hasn't exactly come away unscathed from his time in the hands of the Yuuzhan Vong. Doran and Sannah will be providing the emotionally mushiness for this next arc, as I've officially separated all three Solo couples and am kicking myself for doing so. Sadly, there won't be any overt A/T mushiness for the rest of the story outside a few lines here and there. They'll have a brief reunion towards the end of the Final Prophecy arc, but are separated once more. I promise they get their happily ever after ending though! Book 3 contains the conclusion of the Mando arc and the discovery of Zonama Sekot, and from there things begin to speed up a little more. We have *only* twenty-one more chapters to go!